

Go Not Gently

Guardian1

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Summary

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Description:

Thirteen years after the events of Final Fantasy IX, and Eiko Carol's life is turned upside-down once again by an enemy supposedly long dead. What's a girl to do? Chapter thirteen; the last crusade of Black Tango. Completed. Thanks to all readers!

1. Transferred Malice

A/N: You know the drill; they belong to Square, not me, and I am poor and know not what I do. And because I have wanted to write on Eiko for the longest time, because I admire small child-'ladies' who know exactly what they want at six years old.

Have fun. I know I do!

Prologue — Transferred Malice

For my birthday, when I was ten, Papa gave me hair ribbons and chocolate and a new set of spanners and the chance to pilot an airship without Erin at the co-pilot's wheel. For Vivi's birthday, when he was twelve, he got a houseful of dead children and left us a very gentle little note and went off and Stopped.

Why?

Papa said it best himself. "My little love, do not fault his reasoning. If I came in one morning and

found you dead, and Hilda with you, and my entire city stiff and cold, how could I inhabit this bleak world alone?”

As he says, I could not fault Vivi’s reasoning. Could not blame a little boy who had watched every other single Black Mage stop like clockwork toys around him and had worked so hard to make his own little sons, little Mages — Oh, Vivi, a father at nine! — only to watch them fade away, clouds in dissipating winds. “Would you have wanted him to live like that, alone?” Mother said to me, gentle. No, Mama, never no, I would never have wanted him to suffer.

No matter how little I wanted Vivi to suffer, that never stopped the angry floods of tears into my pillow, the fiery volcanic tantrum that left all of my precious moogles too frightened to come into my room to try and quell my sobs, or any of the maids when in final violent destruction my headbutting the wall tore a hole in it. Although we had been estranged for far too many years, I still couldn’t take this perceived betrayal of my childhood companion.

Ashes to ashes...

A world without Black Mages. No more little bobbing hats, no more lamplight eyes, Vivi gone for

ever. I still remember my tears salty on Zidane's shoulder, and his wet on my hair.

Dust to — mist to mist, Vivi, would that be more suitable?

Did I forget him the year afterwards, or the year after that? I went and lit a candle for him every year of his birthday. We found — well, you couldn't call it a body, there never were, with Black Mages — but Zidane found the hat, and hung it scarecrow at the forefront of the higgledy-piggledy vegetable garden that was the graves of so many who had Stopped before he had. Vivi with his children and his brothers and... And I'm so sorry I forgot.

I'm so sorry. So, so sorry.

Again, I get ahead of myself. Papa writes it at the end of all the articles of mine he intends to publish in the airship journals, my treatises on the insides of machines.

Deep breaths, woman. You can do it. Damn it, Father, we should have checked that they were all *dead*.

Oh, Vivi. I wish you could've seen this.

“Eiko Hildegarde Carol!”

I froze, mid-step, attempting to look like part of the scenery. Like a very *decorative* part of the scenery. Part of the scenery that looked an awful lot like Eiko and was smeared with oil.

Obviously, my plan to meld in with the wallpaper had failed miserably. “Yes, mama?” I asked innocently.

My mother looked me over, head to grimy toe, noting with grim finality the dirt lodged underneath my fingernails, the oil smear on my cheek, the clattering workboots still on my feet. She herself was impeccable, very late fifties and looking suitable for the same number in her thirties, the only clue to her age her ashen hair. “Do I need to ask *why* you are not yet dressed for the luncheon with the Minister of Engineering and the Mayor of Treno?”

“Yucky’s coming? Great,” I said enthusiastically, naming my friend the Minister.

“Do you *have* to call Minister Yucata that? No, no, I don’t care if he laughed like a drain, it’s simply not good *etiquette*.” My mother was loving. She was tender and refined and gentle. However, when it came to bad manners, she was demonic, and I shiver

to think of her youth as a talented Red Mage. I say this for the benefit of any denizen really wondering who was the power behind the Regency. “Have you been working on your airship again?”

I hung my head. “I forgot the time. I’m sorry.”

“Really, dear?” Papa said cheerfully from behind my mother’s shoulder, straightening his cravat and immediately making Mama take it away from him and straighten it again. “Did you manage to get the coolant system up?”

“The coolant system’s not the problem, Father, not in itself, but the engine’s too powerful and uses up too much of it to ever be economically convenient —”

“Blast! We should have seen that from the outset. Still, as long as you’ve got the research going we —”

“Eiko. Dress. Now,” my mother commanded, steely glint in her eyes, and I could hear her mutter as I ran down the hall leaving oily footprints in my wake, “Blood or not, Cid, she is *your* daughter.”

“As if there was any doubt?”

My laughter rang down the hallway.

This is a story about Vivi, and Vivi's legacy, and Vivi's children, and me, to a tiny extent.

And it really did start when I was nineteen, soon to be twenty, the chief engineer in all of Father's personal research prototypes and Eiko Fabool when it came to names printed on academic writing. There had been no war for over ten years and the callouses on my fingers came from holding tools of engineering, not of magic. White magery? I was severely out of practice. Summoning? Even worse, though I prayed to Madeen every night of my life and closed my ears so that I could possibly hear her whisper in my heart. I spent most of my time neck-deep in axle grease and graphs, I clipped my hair to barely brushing my shoulders to that it couldn't get caught in mechanisms, I knew which fork to use when eating Alexandrian pears and I hadn't been kissed since I was ten; I was happy as a sandboy and heading for a fall.

It's hard... adjusting, they say. I'd grown up for the first years of my life with my grandfather on a wild open plain and the only rule of my childhood was, really, don't get yourself killed. I loved wildly and I lived wildly and then I was put into this big huge city where future magic lived in the noise that

the pipes made as they creaked in big airships. Years of patient tuition from my adopted father himself and his ministers broadened my mind so wide I put the sky in it permanently, and all the things that flew in it. You can take the girl out of the ruins, but can you put the city in the girl?

... I have a problem about veering wildly off into the sky, never to return to the subject at hand . Never mind —

First kiss? You want to know about my first kiss? My first kiss was, of course, Zidane, pre-Prince Consort Zidane, clumsy exuberant smacking on the mouth that had him lift me up by the scruff of the neck, shake me, and soften me by asking what Dagger would think if she saw him kissing a pretty girl? My first *kiss* was Vivi, and it wasn't even on the mouth, but he'd smoothed back my hair and brushed something nervous against my forehead and stuttered so hard it sounded as if yans had infested his throat but whatever he'd done it burnt like holy fire. The adults surrounding, of course, had all mmmmed and awwwed as if we were two rare species of round-eyed kittens batting snowdrops. If anybody had seen how pink my cheeks were, they must have attributed it to possible embarrassment-germs.

All right, that was my first kiss. Es. Kisses. Only one mattered anyway.

Was I to be Regent when my father died, or another voted in? It was, after all, traditionally a Cid, but my father had been inconvenient enough to not have a boy child — or *any* children at all; I was adopted and the only one. I didn't really *want* to be Regent, and I didn't really think anybody wanted me as Regent either. I was many things, but no *leader*, and would've just been resentful of the title.

Hades, I was resentful enough just being a 'princess', once I found out what the duty entailed.

"Don't you think you need to brush your hair?"

I paused in the middle of my frantic spongebath, long enough to lose the soap and begin scrabbling frantically. "I need to *wash* my hair first. Great damn gods above, I look like I've been dragged through an engine backwards!" One of my assistants had told me I looked like that once; charmed, I never dropped the expression.

Mogara, who this comment had been addressed to, fluttered daintily over to the window, letting out a soft *kupo* of disapproval. "You've got oil down your front."

“It’ll match. I’ve got oil down my back, too.”

“Your mother’ll be mad as fire.”

“She’s the clotheshorse, not me. I am not a beauty. Or a *bimbo*, for that matter.” I scrubbed frantically; my little Mog had been right about the oil. “Should I bring my reading glasses?”

“Do you think the Minister will pull out any plans?”

“He’s not supposed to, but I know he’s itching to discuss the *Excelsior* with Papa. I’ll put them in my pocket; that way Mother can’t harp.”

“They’ll make a bulge, you know.”

“Oh, I’ll just stuff them down my front with my *hanky*, that’ll really make Mother foam at the mouth.” I grabbed the puffy sponge and scrubbed furiously, soon an unattractive pink colour. “How come *Garnet* never has these problems? Geez!”

I have never been the cleanest individual. This does not come from a hatred of baths and fresh clothes, as I can sink into a bath and blissfully ignore reality for any given number of hours; but I was sticky-fingered as a little kid with the tendency to upset anything I was handling down my front or

on my face and now I was a sticky young adult mostly covered in oil and grease with a steam-fried face. Understandably, this did wonders for my complexion, and I was perpetually ruddy-cheeked and lean instead of curvy, though Mama made me drink a glass of milk each night in a vain attempt to help fill out my dresses in the right places. I had long ago stopped thoughts of ever my possibly being beautiful, gave up, and decided to be an engineer instead of a beautiful princess. When I did marry, it would be somebody dumpy and short with as bad sight as mine who could help me read my plans and look after the children when I was designing. Gods, the way dreams go.

“You’re going to be *late*,” Mogara scolded. “And then your mother is going to shut you out until luncheon is served and cough pointedly when you come in.”

Frantically, I jumped out the bath and left wet footprints as I towelled myself dry, conveniently forgetting a couple of petticoats I didn’t like and figuring Yucata wouldn’t know the difference. Little wings fluttering and looking as censorious as a Mog possibly can, Mogara buttoned me up at the back, worrying all the while and trying to comb my hair at the same time as I pulled on my shoes. When you

have a summoning horn, I've learnt, is to never worry what on Gaia your hair looks like; nobody's going to be looking at it when you have that thing smack dab in the middle of your forehead. Pulling and gasping and unsticking, when I finally saw myself in the mirror, I looked like... I had gotten dressed in five minutes, but I was too frantically overtime to care. I was buttoning my front as I ran down the corridor, the guards trying very hard not to look amused, ran back because I had forgot my glasses entirely and lost them again stuffing them down my front, and then raced so hard to the Blue Room that I almost broke sound.

To arrive, of course, to a closed door.

"Mama —" I began gloomily to the guard on duty.

"Lady Hilda has informed me that you're to be summoned for luncheon once the Regent has finished talks, your grace," droned the guard.

I said a very rude word and stamped my foot. The guard looked as censorious as Mogara had, and I stomped off to the elevator. I was *not* going to hang around in my room for the next half-hour whilst my Mog busily told me off. Miserable and embarrassed — why did this always happen to *me*, I was almost

as grown-up as you could possibly get — I slunk outside.

Years after, I still wonder whether this was a good choice.

I've always found it hard to sulk when I can watch the traffic. When I first came to Lindblum, properly, to make it my home because Garnet made the gentle suggestion to me that since I had no parents and Cid and Hilda had no children maybe we could help each other out since we'd gotten on before — Cid took me up at the top of the Grand Castle, because it was beautiful and because I was overwhelmed and nervous and homesick (and being stubborn to make up for it). The ballet of the airships rocked me to the core — how could they all stay in the sky at the same time! — and I loved it, deeply, ever since. Dreamily, hastily rebuttoning the buttons at the arms of my sleeves and leaning my head against the cool stone of the wall, watching the sky.

All too soon I forgot my shameful poutiness and got lost in crystal cornflower, the far-off throat-taste of oil and the way steam engines smelled. I grew up a dreamer, eventually, but with all my old six-year-

old canniness to make my dreams reality. It made me a good engineer.

I was flowergirl, you know, in Zidane's wedding, me and Vivi though I teased him heartlessly about being *flowergirl* with me! I was convinced my heart was breaking, seeing Zidane get married, though it was awfully hard to keep on in that state of pristine angsty unhappiness because it was so *happy*. Queen Garnet, married to Zidane! *Everybody* knew the fairytale romance and now it was going to get stamped with a big Happily Ever After. Baskets full of rosepetals Vivi and I skipped down the aisle, me in pink and him in grey, me riding on the smug wave of approval at being so gosh-darned cute as he tried not to trip over his own big feet. (He did. I helped him up and told him off in virulent whisper, and pulled him the rest of the way. Dagger, lead by Cid, practically giggled all the way after.) And it was probably the last time I saw him alive, properly, thinking about it.

Lost in dreams, loud noises far-off and all around me, when the first explosion came I didn't think much of it. There are explosions all the time in the city of Lindblum, especially from the experimental factories.

But when I looked south from my reverie, the sky was on fire!

I leapt to my feet, staring dumbly, the roar suddenly huger than anything other than the noise because a junk, a cargo ship, had exploded and was now raining fiery death to the ground. The entire sky was red with the flames. The structure had burst apart as if it had been hit head-on with a missile, exploding rather than crumpling in on itself, and pieces were spinning everywhere —

And another! To the west, another airship blew into smithereens, a low mournful echoing boom; horror upon horror, suffering upon suffering, crucified molten metal cascading down to the screams I could already hear below. I was insanely terrified and insanely angry. This was no normal occurrence; Lindblum was under attack. I could feel magic, taste it silvery on my tongue, and I was racing down to the castle again with warning klaxons screaming into my ears and panic all around me before I knew really what I was doing.

You do *not* blow up Eiko Carol's people in Eiko Carol's *city*!

There was chaos inside the building, too, and it was easy for me to slip into the elevator and punch

my code in to get to the dock. (Of course I had one. It was practically *my* dock.) I was the first to climb aboard a skimmer, the sleek smooth mini-airships I designed a lot myself and thank Fenrir for that because I went in for acceleration more than anything and I was up into the air before you could say knife.

I tucked my skirt in at my knees and clung hard, narrowing my eyes at the thick choking smoke as I tasted fire. I was sick with anger, ill with it, desperately trying to grasp my summons in my head — but I was suddenly all thumbs spiritually, and filled with self-loathing for it.

More explosions. They were being aimed randomly now, at the sky at the buildings at the Grand Castle — oh, Mother! — and I concentrated on the magic flow, ducking past traffic speeding out of the danger zone in a way that might've made Zidane proud of me. I sped higher, to clear the smoke, and then I saw it. It made my heart go cold.

A figure, on top of the control tower near the gate, perched like a crow and knitting magic with their hands that billowed out powerful and fiery to the city in front of it. Oh, but hadn't I heard descriptions of this all before? There was a hat, and

clumsy black clothing, and ragged ebon wings stretching up behind it. This was all happening too fast for me — I remembered warm firelit nights kneeling in front of Garnet and content to have her comb out my hair as Zidane, virtuoso storyteller, told us about the Black Waltzes. Three of them, like the dance step, and they looked like Vivi — *you remember, don't you, Vivi? We socked it to 'em good, don't shiver now* — and the other Black Mages, only they were more... malevolent. Tall, and ragged, and very *dead*.

I couldn't let them take away Dagger, now, could I? Stop your noises, Rusty.

So who was this chill from the past, golden eyes huge and hands clad in dragonleather as he blew up my city? The screams and the continuing dementia from this... this *thing* brought me back to reality, and I settled the skimmer pointing at him and prepared to rush. At least that made him stop casting!

Why hadn't I got my Angel Flute? I could be casting Holy now, and blowing this bastard into ten million Black Mage bits. Stupid, stupid Eiko! Get ahead of yourself again, why don't you! I was suddenly hugely aware of the danger I was in until

the Regent's Guard arrived, a white mage summoner who didn't have her staff and couldn't find the words to Call her slumbering summons. Desperate, suicidal, I lunged, my hair whipping in my face.

Lazily, wings stretching out, he stepped off the tower and zipped upwards with a few beats of the powerful appendages. I swerved so fast my teeth chattered and the chase was on.

I had gotten soft. I had been the leanest brownskinned wilderness-child that had ever grown in Madain Sari and months of adventuring with Zidane eating my own cooking (*yuck!*) had toughened me up further, but sixteen years of big meals and

Mama forcing me to eat every last bit and remember the poor starving dwarves had softened me up. Being an engineer, it hadn't taken away from the toughness of my hands, but thinking in a situation when everything around you is on fire and you're unarmed and the culprit is getting away made me weak at the knees. I think that the only thing that bore me through those minutes was my anger and my hatred.

Caught without a weapon. Freya would have given me a right ding about the ears, in her words, if

she'd known.

The figure — I called it *he* out of the simple subconscious need to place anything destructive with a masculine gender — stopped so quickly I shot past him, having to flip around so hard I saw red spots in front of my eyes and my palms were slick with sweat. The smoke from the fires was going to reach me soon, and I was going to choke; I didn't care. All I could do was *stare* at him; those malevolent golden eyes, curved into crescents and utterly emotionless behind the smoke-dark mask. He turned to survey the city, overturned utterly into chaos, and then back at me, as if to say; Well? Did you like my handiwork?

I screamed out my frustration. “You *bastard*, you *murderer*, I'm going to kill you ten million times over and make you wish you'd never been born!”

“I exist only to kill,” he droned simply. His voice was deep, a drone, hot and dusty. I noticed that there was a pair of dark devil-horns on his hat. Oh, I remembered, I remembered with a sudden burst of clarity the old possessed Black Mages that followed Kuja and had no thoughts and the simple businesslike way that they murdered.

I couldn't die. Grandpa, Alexander, Vivi, I couldn't.

"Yeah, well," I spat, unable to think up a suitably cutting remark, "How about a taste of your own medicine!"

"I exist only to kill." He hovered there, caught on the hot updraft, and held out his hand to me as if offering; fire blazed there, hot and blistering, his hand caught in the wavering nimbus of magic. I could feel it rolling off him in tonguetied waves, magic, the miasma thick and polluting. His voice sounded as if he hadn't used it in years. "I come to destroy. I am retribution. I exist —"

He never got any further than that, as I rushed him again. I could hear the distant chopping noises of the other airships my Uncle Artania would be pulling out to deal with the damage. Ha. *You're nicked, my lad.* He couldn't possibly outrun machines — not with just wings.

The mage seemed to think of that as well and suddenly took off — up! In the silliest, most knee-jerk and thoughtless reaction of my life, I jolted the speeder up at breakneck speed and launched myself at him.

High up over the city.

Awfully high up.

I hadn't flown in years, and I didn't even have my grandfather's wings, packed safely and lovingly away in tissue paper at the bottom of my closet. If I fell, I was going to be the splattiest engineer this side of the Fossil Roo. And staying on was awfully hard when the target was shaking and spinning like a bucking chocobo and me a gadfly clutched to his back.

My speeder stopped, launching into autopilot the moment it lost my weight; the muscles in his back pumping as he tried to fling me off, I dug my nails into his layers of clothing. I clung for dear life, both of us spiralling upwards and upwards as he flung out his arms and screamed; my intervention didn't stop him from casting, his spell already too quick for me to even *think* about dispelling, and we both crashed headlong into the portal he'd cast above us and everything went black.

This turned out to be a bad career plan, and definitely *no* way to treat a lady!

2. Those With Black Faces

Go Not Gently

Chapter One — Those With Black Faces

It was kind of like the second you get when you wake up from a nightmare and you can't exactly remember what it was about, but then the second after, you remember *everything*; only this time, with the third second, I couldn't banish the demons away.

I'd been bloody *kidnapped*.

Wherever I was it was dark and musty and there were absently rotting floorboards beneath my body; over me was a blanket, soft cotton but as dank and old as everything else in whatever horrible place I had ended up. I had obviously passed out after the trauma of being tugged through somebody else's portal, their magical signature overwhelming mine. Okay, so I hadn't

meant to and I'd kind of kidnapped myself, but still — damn damn damn!

My eyes adjusted to the area around me and for some reason it felt familiar. I was in a high-ceilinged room, the rafters dark and looming and the air thick with age. Thick, but dry; I'd tasted that dryness before. It was cool to the point of an uncomfortable, sunless chill — little moisture in the air, my mind thought clinically — possibly somewhere up in the snow, though wouldn't the air temperature be colder still, somewhere above sea level —

Sod the climate, where the hell was I?

I bounded to my feet, dizzy and my heart beating hard, and my hand caught an object close to my place of rest — a table. My fingers groped the wood uselessly, squinting; the floor was drenched in pieces of parchment, pages ripped from books in languages I couldn't quite recognize, rather new messiness instead of the clunk and ancient litter I had halfway expected. It smelt like perhaps somebody had died here, though, blood and gore —

A candle was lit, a slightly hissing flare ahead of me in the long enormous room, grasped in a

dark leather glove that flickered orange light on ragged ebony feathers and a hat. Brighter still were the golden eyes that burnt within the trappings, enough to chill my blood even further.

I think I felt like Mama must have done, telling me the story — the prisoner of Kuja, coming face-to-face with her captor. “For a moment I wondered what on earth I was afraid of,” she’d remembered softly. “He had such a pretty smile.”

Wax dripped over the fingers. “Tell me,” he intoned, “why I shouldn’t kill you.”

I drew myself up. “I am Princess Eiko of the House of Fabool,” I crackled at him imperiously. “Killing me would be a *mistake* on your part, sir.”

“I am Lady Hilda Fabool, minister and wife to the Regent of Lindblum — and I don’t advise coming any closer.”

“Because I’d kick your scrawny Black Mage rear, you murdering son of a whore.”

(When the time comes to collect all heroic and rousing speeches from women of the ages, my name will not be among them.)

He just stared at me for a moment, lifting the candle higher. I could see the bookcases lining the shelves now, some half-empty, some still packed full with fat tomes; I was obviously in a library, and one where the windows had been completely draped over with thick heavy sacking. It was as dark as night.

“I doubt they’d find a body.” His voice wasn’t even menacing; he was just stating a fact. “You would just be one of the many victims of what happened to your city.”

Oh. Oh. My eyes filled with tears; my city, o my homeland, o my people. How many people had died in those crashes? “Why?” I snarled. ‘Why? Are you trying to spark off a war? Why did you have to murder all the civilians? Why didn’t you go after our *military*, instead of — of — the tugs?’ I felt my voice rise on a hysterical note. I was trembling. “Why?”

“The military installations have less people.”

“So you *wanted* hundreds to die!”

“I exist only to kill,” he said, simply.

That made me *furious*. My voice shook with anger, half in tears. “Garnet. Queen Garnet of

Alexandria's going to find you and kill you for this, just you wait. She and Zidane, it doesn't matter if I die, they'll pull the feathers off your wings one by one and torture you to —"

"Zidane will do *nothing*," he snapped, the first sign of emotion I'd seen from him. His golden crescents of eyes narrowed. "The people die. The cycle goes on. They sleep, and noises are made, and they will be the ghosts of memories in ten years' time. They will be forgotten by your city and forgotten by your Zidane."

"What does Zidane matter to you?"

"Traitor-bastard-genome" If he'd had lips, they would have curled. "I hope his children all come with tails and won't be able to survive out of the tanks of Bran Bal. I hope they all *die*. I hope he sows his wife's womb with salt every time they fuck."

Had the other Waltzes been like this? No wonder Zidane killed all three of them in quick succession. An almost-leer of smug self-righteousness crept as easily over my face as my rising blush as I stared him down, one hand groping back. Maybe there was a weapon to kill this winged rat with. Something. Anything.

“They have two children,” I said sweetly. “The queen will have her third come summer. The Princess Cornelia — she’s eight and their eldest and *beautiful*, and you’ll never touch her, you *bastard*.”

He half-flew, half-leapt the gap between us, the candle in his hand raised and ready to strike. My hands had found a heavy book and I flung it up at his face, even as his hand came down; it lessened the blow but I still got a stinging backhand, metal nubs on the back of his gloves slicing open my cheek and sending me back against the table. I hit it hard, wincing, him stumbling back as well and the candle falling in a soft waxy mess on the floorboards, small light crumbling out as there was another long silence — the only noise was my breathing. It wasn’t as bad as it could have been. Hell, I was an engineer — I’d been in worse drunk barfights, though those had stopped when I was eighteen and my mother had threatened to put me in the stocks. I raised my hand to my cheek, the wound stinging terribly, eyes closing again. There was no noise from him, either.

“So,” I said, after a long while. “Tell me. Why aren’t you killing me?”

The silence again was even longer, until there was a noise from him that sounded like an indrawn shuddery breath. “Because your heart beats,” he murmured. “Because your heart beats and I’m — so lonely here — so lonelylonelylonelylonely nobodynever ever —” Another shuddery breath and a sob, and he was crying.

My face contorted in disgust. A murderer. A wussy murderer. “Kill me now,” I demanded, voice drunk with contempt. “I’d rather die than think that a whiny magical crybaby killed all those people. I’d rather die than sit here listening to you. I’ll do myself in if you don’t stop.”

The crying stopped almost as abruptly as it had begun. I realized that, quite possibly, I had a loony on my hands aching for a bin. It wouldn’t surprise me. All Black Mages — this one must have been a leftover — were pretty much insane clockwork toys, only granted sentience by their own grace. This one had gone the opposite way of grace and was probably dancing in his own little world with half the lights on and the other ones flickering funny colours. “Maybe I will,” he said. “Maybe I’m toying with you, like a cat, and I’m going to eat you later.”

“Good. That’s a relief.” I folded my arms, the bleeding slowed to a halt. I may have not had a staff, but curative magic flows through a White Mage’s fingertips like water. “I’m bony. You may want to boil the meat off first.”

Another long silence. My head was beginning to ache.

“I want to go home,” I said again. “Look, I’ll make it fair. You blindfold me, take me home, and I’ll have to *hunt* to kill you instead. It’ll take, oh, five minutes longer.”

“Quite a feisty one, aren’t you, Princess?” A touch of — something — moved into his tone. “Coming along was your own stupid fault, little girl, because you are boneheaded and stupid and like all other humans on this earth and you see the situation like a glass sphere — you can’t see into it properly, just your distorted reflection.”

Not a rant. I didn’t need his lunatic mutterings. So much for thinking him lucid for a moment. “Look. Go tell your excuses to the old stove in the corner, I couldn’t care less about your reasons. Who are you?”

A rustling. The candle was retrieved, but not lit; the touch in his voice grew, and the tone was of bitter irony. “Tango.”

“What?”

“Tango. Black Tango.” A rustle — he stood, sounding like a birdflock — and lit the candle again with his own fingers, straightening the wick. Magic still radiated off him like the warmth from a star, only now I knew he was more dangerous than I’d dreamed — a sentient-insane creature, no clockwork.

I was stunned. “You have *got* to be kidding me.”

“No. I am —”

“I mean, that’s the *stupidest* name ever. All right, I get the three and the Waltz, but what’s up with Tango? What’s your brother’s name, Black Hokey-Pokey? Black Swing? Black Samba? Black Chocobo Dance?”

There was another breathless silence, and then Tango laughed. It was not a happy sound, but he laughed.

“I like you,” he said eventually. “I won’t kill you tonight.”

“Thanks ever so.”

“I’ll keep you here,” he whispered. “I sometimes bring little alive things up here because I like the pulse, but I forget to feed them on purpose and they die. Everything dies. Sometimes it’s kinder not to feed them anyway so that they don’t have to be in pain from living. Don’t you think?”

“I think you need one of those jackets that gives you a hug from around the front and leather straps to tie you to a bed,” said I, Eiko ‘Kind And Caring And Not Inflammatory To Lunatics’ Carol.

“You even tell jokes.” He stepped away, leaving the candle on the arm of a chair behind him. “Maybe it will be tomorrow night instead.”

No. I didn’t want tomorrow night. I wanted my mother and this creature was making my heart clutch up. “I *hate* you,” I spat at him, tired and upset and helpless.

“No,” Tango said. “I hate you more than you could possibly imagine, Eiko Carol.”

He strode over to the side of the library, flinging open a door. Immediately a rush of hot air and bright light filled the room, letting me gawk; it wasn't a door, it was a huge makeshift window, and yellow sand stretched out for all the eye could see outside. A few grains even blew into the room from the hot wind; we were high-up, that much I could discern. Not even bothering to look back at me, he leaped out the opening.

“Goodnight,” he informed me, wings spread, slammed the door shut and me into darkness and was gone.

I sat down in the darkness, and wondered where the dead little corpses were, and I shivered at the echo of his voice on my name.

When I was young and my mother and father were teaching me to read again — my Grandpa had done all he could, but I got lazy after he died and was incredibly rusty where long words were concerned — my mother thoughtfully gave me a huge pile of books she thought a young girl would like and let me sort through them. These books all went along the same awful themes — young

romantic women in distress who tripped over willing young men on white chocobos and couldn't save their lives if you handed them a manual and all the right parts.

I always thought that was the reason I wouldn't make a good princess at first. I wasn't good at fluttering my eyelashes and swooning. Sure, I was excellent at falling in love melodramatically, but I couldn't possibly imagine being holed up and kidnapped in a high tower and held for ransom.

Then I realized, 'Hey, *Dagger* never had to do all this crap,' shelved the romance novels and went back to reading 'The Physics Of Flight' by Sextans Zazaria. Actually, I think that illustrates most of my pre-puberty life with my new mother and father.

So, stuck in a tower that was possibly hundreds of feet high up, with only a flickering candle to guide me and the promise of a Not All There genocidal winged bastard who had bad choice in names, I was *not* going to sit down like a pretty pretty princess and whimper. How embarrassing, to be *kidnapped* in the first place, even if it *had* been my fault. Bloody hell.

“Right, Eiko-my-girl,” I said cheerily, my voice a miserable little nothing in the dark oppressive library-tower. “Let’s just get you down from here, and everything will be a box of birds.” *If Tango doesn’t catch me. If I don’t get eaten by an antlion at the bottom.*

And once I’m down there, how on earth do I survive in a desert? What if we’re a million miles from nowhere? We probably are a million miles from nowhere! We’re in a desert!

“Summoning,” I muttered to myself. “Right. You can summon. You’re going to have to do the old stick-circle-chant job, and even Madeen’s going to be angry and feeling unloved, but they know I still love them even though we haven’t Called each other, right?”

There was a dreadful silence in that library. There was a dreadful hungry darkness, too. It was a circular tower room, with bookshelves lining almost every part of the walls, and a few tables scattered about — most of them with open books. Torn-up books and pieces of paper fluttered uselessly about, and there were dozens of candles melted down to stubs. I grabbed quickly a few of the bigger ones and lit them from

the candle Tango had held, that — miraculously — hadn't been blown out by his exit. They didn't exactly light up the gloom, but they let me see my way.

I craned my neck, reaching down inside my dress for my hankerchief-wrapped glasses before realizing — to my horror — that I didn't have them. Doing the dance that every glassers-wearer immediately does — patting their face, patting their head, patting in vain their neck — I noted, in misery, that they were gone. So much for seeing my way. Oh, well; I only needed them really for reading documents, and as useful as it would be to have the room thrown into extra-sharp relief I would have to make do. Maybe I didn't exactly want to see what lay in the corners anyhow.

Black Tango. Just another monster in the lineup cast of thousands I'd seen in my short life. The way he talked unnerved me, though; there was something solidly sentient in his whimperings about loneliness, in the way he'd talked, in the way he'd insulted. I felt a hot flush rise to my cheeks again when I recalled his incredibly crude, heated curse on Zidane and Garnet; that was enough to turn any puzzlement

I'd had into just hatred again. What if he was going after Alexandria right now? My heart thudded at the thought. Explosions in the castle, Dagger unable to do anything in time, or maybe the summoning of Alexander once more to drown this foul clutching crow in Holy —

I shivered miserably, sitting up on one of the tables and casting my eye about hopefully for any equipment or metal or rope. Nothing; less than nothing. My stomach rumbled — I was thirsty and I'd missed breakfast this morning and I'd been *really* looking forward to lunch.

Trapdoor. Maybe there was a trapdoor.

Jumping up, my heavy skirt rustling about my ankles — damn dress! — I began to conduct a thorough search of the area. Tango was right in one respect; instead of helpful exits, I kept on finding little bony corpses, rotted skeletons and feathery little bundles of decomposing flesh. I resisted the urge to gag, not in any way hungry by now, and continued my fruitless search. The floor was made out of wood, a strange thing out in the desert areas, and there was sometimes a few ragged remnants of floor coverings that must

have mouldered away. The room was filled with old death.

I searched until I finally found what I had been looking for; a handle, and once carefully rubbed, the old outline of a square trapdoor. With all my might, I immediately heaved and pulled and tugged at the iron staple, but it wouldn't budge for love nor money. Obviously, and to my fierce disappointment, it had been rusted shut. Another fruitless search began for something to prise it open, but there was nothing — less than nothing. Just books and candles and darkness.

And chill, in the shadows. I pulled the blanket over my shoulders and sat on a table, not wanting to be near Tango's old 'friends'. I had no exceptional desire to become one, either. After a few restless minutes of indecision, I went over to the door Tango had left through, and pushed it open.

An immediate blast of wind rocked me, and I held on for dear life; it was a long, long, long, stairless, smooth-wall-way-down.

I closed the door. Hell, damn, hell-damned Hades. There was nothing to do but wait; wait for

somebody who would possibly never come. I couldn't even make a good attempt at killing Tango; he was my only way out of here. Garnet and my father and Zidane would come for me. Eventually. I'd just have to survive until I could get away or give time for them to come for me.

I shivered. I've always been afraid of the dark. It wasn't one of those childhood unexplainable fears that come deep from your subconscious; it was a later fear, a fear fostered around a campfire's ashes when you lay huddled underneath a travelling blanket and wondered if you'd live through the night's monsters. They always used to tuck me and Vivi up close together in a tent — no matter how much I protested that I wanted to be near Zidane — and I would spend the night back-to-back with him. I quickly learnt that Vivi, the pretty little firemage that he was, had one of the warmest bodies out of all of us and that cuddling close would allay the chill. Back when Mog was still with me, curled up tightly in the front pocket of my overalls, there were three steady heartbeats. Him asleep and me curled up behind him, I'd watch whoever was sitting by the campfire as nighttime guard through the flap of the tent. I remember, still to this day, exactly the

way Amarant looked when he was haloed by the campfire and sharpening his claws, and Quina, huge fork-weapon poking at potatoes she was cooking in the ashes.

The smell. I remember the scent of all of them. Vivi smelt like ashes and smoke and raspberries.

Somehow I managed to sleep. Curled up uncomfortably on the top of the table, too afraid of sleeping on the dank floor, I restlessly and uncomfortably wavered in and out of consciousness. I'd picked up an awful bump on the head from somewhere; probably Black Tango manhandling me. When he finally came back, I was huddled up and half-asleep, sitting and blinking at him owlishly as he shut the door behind him. It was dark outside.

"This is no place for a lady to sleep," he said. Or, at least, a voice said — the candles had burnt down and he was invisible in the darkness, just a pair of eyes.

"Who said I'm a lady?"

He was amused. "This is no place for a woman to sleep, then. You can't stay here, Princess —"

“Damn right I can’t stay here! I want to go *home!*”

Skillfully, he ignored me. “I’m taking you down. I still don’t know what to do with you, Eiko Carol. Not killing you, not yet. The time for death is not yet come.”

Time for death. I shuddered. “Where were you?” I demanded. “Back attacking my city? Back attacking Alexandria?”

“Alexandria?” He laughed, hollow. “No. Never-not-yet. I need to be stronger.”

He thought he could get *stronger*? After *that* display?

“I still know Garnet is going to kill you.”

“I exist only to kill.” Not that again — but then, he added, soft, “And I exist only to die. Not her job, no, not readily.”

I recoiled from his touch, remembering that he was still crazier than a trick sparrow. “I don’t want you to take me *anywhere*. Where’s ‘down’?”

“Not here.” How helpful. “And no, you can’t stay up here. You’re interrupting my work.”

“I am so sorry to be inconvenient!” I should have burnt the books when I’d had the chance, never mind the taboo of destroying knowledge. I backed up even more as he reached the end of the table. Great gods above, his wings were enormous! “I’ll make a formal apology!”

The eyes narrowed, calculating. “Are you frightened of me?”

What to say? Yes, I was frightened of him, Eiko the highly-strung engineer, Eiko who hadn’t had blood on her hands in *years* and had been very happy to do so. I’d forgotten the fear that had come with possible death and oh, how bitter it tasted. “Frightened? Of you? Don’t make me laugh. I’ve been more frightened of my own sandwiches.”

“That’s odd.” Odd? His *voice* was odd. It wasn’t like the other Black Mages, uniform, sweet, warm, odd inflexions — it was light and cutting and expressive. This Black Tango was confusing the hell out of me. “They’re usually all frightened, quivery little claws, birds flapping — sometimes they break their wings, you know, and they hurt themselves.”

“You,” I said flatly, “aren’t frightening. You’re just *sick*.”

“Yes, yes. Sick. I’ve always been sick. The entire world is sick. You’re sick.”

I rolled my eyes and scooted forward, landing on the ground. The sudden action made him spring back like a frightened cat; he was even more highly-strung than I was, obviously. “All right. I’m tired of this place. Take me wherever.”

“As you wish, milady,” Tango said sardonically, and backhanded me casually so hard it all blanked out into a red burst of nothing.

And that’s all I remember of that.

3. Bleeding From His Mouth

Go Not Gently

Chapter Two — Bleeding From His Mouth

There's a kind of rhythm that comes from going to sleep due to being hit over the head very hard with something two nights in a row. I had a concussion that could probably win prizes, and a headache that could at least get Highly Commended ribbons.

Understand this: there are very few princesses who get knocked around. They're confined mainly to the kind of romance novels I used to read when I was littler to make my blood go hot and cold, and Garnet. I wasn't furious at my treatment so much as confused and bemused and a little bit frightened; I was thrown in a loop

utterly by the crazy feathery clockwork toy who was —

Sitting on the dresser opposite my bed, when I woke up.

I woke up very quietly, a few steps at a time.

It was a room. Unlike the library, this room was sparkling clean and smelt a bit like polish and soap rather than the musty driedblood of the library. There were cracks in the walls, and the blankets thin and patched. They chafed roughly against my bare ski — *bare skin*. I had been stripped during the night, and since I had no other loonies to suspect around the place, all fingers pointed towards Black Tango.

Too many shocks. I was naked, I was in a bed. There was filmy soft light all throughout, highlighting the plaster whitewash of the walls, the cool stone in a room as devoid of moisture as the tower. Still in a desert. My captor, crouched with his shapeless knees up to his chest and his wings half-around him like a cloak, was watching me keenly — all black leather and horned hat and dark crescents of eyes.

Lying there, underneath those blankets, I ticked off the possible reasons he could want me. Uncle Artania had taught me this, in long lessons in politics. Politics was by far one of the more interesting of my classes; it was all backstabbing and greed and nastiness, just like a very good story.

Hostage. No. He wanted no bargain, though I had no idea of his goal. If I could find out his goal, then perhaps I could shed more light on my situation. His only apparent goal, though, was to cause mayhem and destruction *and*, following in the footsteps of all other maniacal villains I had known, obliteration of Gaia. Lacking in panache, maybe, but a safe bet — especially considering what the bastard had done to my Lindblum. But no, no hostage, though I was in good condition.

Food. No. Black Mages had, as far as I'd known, not had a taste for human flesh — despite the screaming stories of the Burmecian refugees. Vivi, in fact, had had a taste for trifle. (The night of Garnet's wedding we snuck down to the kitchens, at so early in the morning we couldn't believe it, and stole the remnants of the desserts under Quina's benevolent eye. He liked the custard and the jelly and the whipped cream. I

liked the cherry pie. We talked about what we wanted to be when we grew up.)

Rape. Possibly he wanted me for the pleasures of the flesh. I discounted this theory almost immediately, since if he'd wanted that, I gathered I'd be much more sore between the thighs than I was currently. After all, I'd been out like a light, and as inexperienced as I was in the pleasures of the flesh, I knew very well that an unconscious body is just as good as a conscious one for needs — with the added bonus of no screaming. Besides, Black Mages were *not* exactly renowned for their love of fleshly things, having no easily found flesh themselves.

No reason to want me. I was definitely an uninvited guest.

Conclusion; he was going to kill me.

I sat up, careful with the blankets, more irritated than disgusted at my nudity as I primly pulled the covers up. He didn't seem to care, anyhow.

“Good morning, Princess.” He had something in his hands; it was a little bell, and he was

cleaning it with a cloth. It made no noise as he wiped it. “Did you sleep well?”

“Can we skip the pleasantries and get to the point, Tango? If you’re going to kill me, I’d like to know so I can get dressed.”

“Your dress is being cleaned,” he said diffidently. “I’ll find you clothes if you need them. Nobody will care, not around here. No witty banter for me? I like witty banter, you know.”

“Do you have nothing better to do?” I asked him testily. “No more cities to blow up, or Lindblum to finish?”

“Lindblum was a test run.” He shrugged one shoulder, setting down the bell, feathers ruffling softly. “I am aiming for Alexandria, which will be the first city I grind to rubble and people I mulch between my fingers. After that... it will all seem much easier.”

“Look.” Leaning back, I eyed him, resting down in the cool pillows with some relief. Gods, my head *hurt*. “You’ve already made two of the stupidest mistakes in the book. One, you’re

telling me your plan. Two, you haven't killed me."

The eyes narrowed to crescent slits. With a Black Mage, you had to read their eyes; this one was as transparent as glass. "What makes you think I won't?"

"Because you haven't yet."

"Maybe I'm fattening you up." The eyes changed, shifting from anger to extraordinarily uncomfortable amusement. "Maybe I haven't eaten in a long, long while."

"That joke got old quickly, Tango."

"Life gets old quickly, *Eiko*."

Petulant, petulant, and it was the first time he had used my name alone; salt and lemon juice, vindictive like spit. My head hurt again. I was only equipped for dealing with nice, calm, impersonal villains who probably wanted my money or were at least insane in a way I could understand and had a mustache they could twirl. Tango had no mustache, and whatever he was twirling, it was making me dizzy.

“So,” I said. “Hand me a bone. What are you going to *do* with me here? How am I part of your master plan?”

He slipped down off the dresser to walk to the middle of the room. It was a strangely lavish one; the rugs on the floor had once been of superior quality, the furniture of fine hardwood, the gilt on everything gold and not sham. The threads in my patchy coverlet were silk.

“I wanted,” he said slowly, “to kill you.”

“Don’t tell me you took pity on me.” Pity was more than I could bear.

“No.” The words were try and completely utterly truth. ‘I was going to kill you, Lindblum Princess. I was going to split you and scatter your pieces over your city like wet chunky ashes.’ He seemed quite coherent now, if disgusting. “But you pose no threat, and you are amusing, and you have a pulse. You cannot run off into the desert, and you cannot be rescued; the wards around this place are more than you can break, linden-bloom princess, so nobody can see you when your eyes are red from tears. You are to be a useful toy when I am uninspired.”

“A toy.” I was flabbergasted. How undignified. “That’s all I am to you?”

“Better people have been toys to better masters, Carol,” he murmured. “You will be a good toy, and tell me things, and breathe, when I want you to be good and tell me things and breathe.”

“No!” This was worse than pity. “You exist only to kill, don’t you? Kill me. I’d prefer to be dead than exist only for *your* twisted sake.”

In a flash, he bounded over to my bed, leathergloved hands wrapping around my thin throat. I could hardly speak; I could hardly breathe. “Choose me,” he hissed, “or choose to honestly die, here and now.”

I wish I had been brave enough to choose death. I wish I had been brave enough to bite his fingers. But I am weak, and life was sweet, and death was so bitter; being choked, I immediately knew that there were *far* worse things than being kept around as a talking doll for Tango to play with. Not with the hope of getting out.

“You,” I rasped, voice squeezed into half-oblivion, eyes clenching shut for fear they’d pop

out as he bruised my throat. Now my throat would match my cheeks, darkened blossoming lavender, I knew without a mirror. “I choose you!”

He let go. He stepped back, not outwardly mollified, but his hands fell limp and he nodded at me shortly as he tucked them behind his back like a naughty child. His wings flared out slightly, soft with a noise like a sheet being billowed out to fold, and he closed his eyes so that underneath the brim of his hat there was nothing but darkness.

“So be it, milady,” Tango said softly. “This room is being watched, so I recommend you do not leave it yet. I will get you fresh clothes. Green,” he said decidedly, and he opened the door to the outside and shut it behind him.

I turned my head away into the pillow, still shivering at the violence. A part of me wanted to weep at my uncertain nightmarish future, but my cheeks remained as dry as the sand outside.

He made me think of Vivi.

Not in personality, of course. Tango was weird and malicious and moody and quite obviously had some Problems only able to be cured with a double dose of Flare. Vivi... the Vivi I had prodded, teased, superciliously bossed around as a little girl. I did love him, like I loved Garnet and Freya and even yucky old Amarant, but I didn't know how to show it. I didn't know how to show *any* love back then, any except my fullblown melodramatic crush on Zidane. All the other love had been bred out of me in my childhood, dying when my grandfather died, dying when Mog died, held tightly and passionately to my moogles — though I couldn't often even show it to them. It was only later, under the gentle tuition of my mother and my father, that I learned my own halting love-yous.

So yes, he made me think of Vivi, as I lay there huddled under the blankets and my throat ached. He didn't deserve to die that way. As Zidane said, maybe we might have just postponed the inevitable if we'd talked him out of it — Black Mages never do live very long — but it didn't mean we felt any better. And I felt particularly horrible. Mean to him in ways that might have

seemed vindictive all our friendship, and now I'd never be able to say sorry.

Black Mages. They never *did* live very long. Except for the Waltzes, perhaps? Was Tango running on a time limit? Oh, that would be sweet. Maybe I could help him along.

I dozed off, only to wake again when I heard the squeak of the door. I sat up, immediately expecting Tango, but a much smaller figure entered the room.

hats bobbing the entire village full soft tools-of-war-turned-farmers please please please

A Black Mage. A little bit smaller than me, but still recognizable. Oh, Gods, my eyes pricked with tears. A Black Mage.

He shuffled in, closing the door behind him. He was dressed in blue and red and green; his hat was carefully kept brown leather, and his eyes were gold and warm as sunshine. He carried a green shirt over one of his arms and laid it down at the foot of my bed.

“What’s your name?” I asked gently, voice trembling in anticipation.

The mage looked up at me; yes, he heard me, yes, he understood! Fumbling with his gloves, he peered out at me from under the brim of his hat, straightening it absently. “Ah, your highness,” he eventually murmured. “Name?”

“Yes, your name.” *You can help me get out of here, you’re a Black Mage, even if you are helping Tango. Oh, I hope there’s more of you, I can rescue you, we can put you in with Mikoto —* “What people call you. All Black Mages have numbers.”

“Fifty-six,” he volunteered immediately. “But that’s never been my name, your highness.”

“Call me Eiko.” I looked at him curiously. A very low number. I’d known a Mr. Fifty-Six once. He was obviously new-batch; but how? My heart began to clutch still. Mist. You couldn’t make Black Mages from anything but Mist. “So what does Black Tango call you?”

“Master?” He looked even more startled, as if just reminded of Tango’s existence. Ah, so *that’s* who made them. “He... He just calls me...”

He was obviously uncomfortable, so I shook my head decidedly. “Never mind,” I said, gentle.

“Can I give you a name? To call you by?”

The mage folded the shirt at the foot of my bed, smoothing out all the wrinkles. I immediately stood and pulled it over my head; it reached down to my knees, and I hastily did up the other buttons. “If you like,” he said, uncertain.

“Well.” I went to look out the window, pulling the curtains aside. “How long ago were you made?”

“Four months and fifty-six days and thirteen minutes and twenty-eight seconds,” was the immediate answer.

Very new batch. “Do you have many brothers and sisters?”

“There are a hundred of us at the moment.” Tango had obviously not warned him off answering my questions. “There always are.”

“What, a hundred of you?” I was confused. “Never any more?”

“We Stop after a year, your hi — Princess.”

“Eiko.” I nodded, slow. “How long has Tango been here?”

He blinked, slowly. “I... I do not know, Eiko. A very long time. I think. Longer than us. Longer than when we began.”

Black Mages who lived for years and years on end, all raven-wings and dry bitter vengeance. We should have checked, Zidane; let not sleeping demons lie, if there is any chance of them waking up.

“Then it was summer here, when you were born.”

“It rains in summer,” he told me gravely. “We have to all go and dry our clothes every time they get wet, otherwise they rot.”

“I’ll call you Rain, then,” I said, because I think I went to the Garnet Til Alexandros School Of Creative Nicknames. “If you don’t mind.”

“No.” He seemed pleased, eyes bright. “I don’t.”

“What do you call the other Black Mages around you?”

Rain squinted a little. “Just... Brother,” he said, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

I missed Mogara. I wanted my mother. I wanted my father. I wanted my set of spanners and my airships. “I like that,” I said softly.

I don’t think he understood; just went on opening the windows and straightening things and smoothing the blankets over the bed. “The Master said that you weren’t to jump out the window,” Rain told me industriously. “He said that it’s a long way down and that there’s an antlion pit really close, who’d save him the trouble of having to eat you, he said.”

A sudden burst of realization tugged at my brain. I reached up to push my glasses further back on my nose before noticing that they weren’t there, and I swore. “My glasses! Where are my glasses?”

“I don’t know,” Rain said apologetically, bobbing on his big feet. “I’m really sorry. I didn’t take your things away.”

“I *need* them,” I fussed. I didn’t, not unless I wanted to read text without holding the book right up to my nose, but I felt naked without them. “If you see them, can you give them back to me?”

“Of course.”

So sweet, obliging, friendly. My heart tore for a graveyard full of rotting hats and a chocobo called Bobby Corben. “Rain? Does this place have a name?”

“Yes,” he said immediately. “The Desert Palace.”

The Desert Palace.

That explained a great deal. One of the last places we hadn’t touched of Kuja’s various rats’ nests; there had been too much magic overflow, too many traps a vindictive Genome had set for wary travellers, a home too much tailored for it’s dead master. Peace brings laziness.

I raised my hand to touch my horn slowly, feeling the familiar velvety stub of the bone. “Kuja,” I whispered.

Rain stiffened. “We do not say the Grandmaster’s name.”

“Grandmaster? You mean you all really are associated with that bastard Kuja?” If I had had any hopes of this being a complete one-off and there were no more connections to Genomes or

Terra or men who were prettier than women they were all shattered. I doubted that I had had any naïve hopes for that happening, really.

“We revere the dead,” Rain said primly, with just a hint of pitying disapproval. “We do not speak his name. There are many names we do not speak, but we especially do not speak of the Master’s father.”

This was getting *stupid*.

It is one thing to be kidnapped. It is another thing to be kidnapped by a monster whose type was supposedly killed and all dead years ago. It is another thing entirely to discover that the monster is apparently the son of another monster who happens to be the extremely odd clone brother of a very good friend of yours who is almost your brother-in-law and who was the reason for a lot of destruction and why you sometimes have shapeless nightmares and I felt another headache coming on.

Noticing my distress, Rain gently lead me by the hand to sit down on a chair. All I could do was absently grip the sides, staring into nothing. Kuja didn’t *have* children. Of course, as another Black Waltz and his creation, there was no reason

why Tango couldn't be having a twisted fatherly relationship with ol' Pretty In Purple; it was just shortsightedly *stupid*, that was all.

“Rain?” I murmured. “Rain, if you help me get out of here, I could take you to a really wonderful place where the old Black Mages used to live.”

“Black Mage Village.” The sadness in his voice was palpable, and his knowledge surprised me. He was certainly no mindless doll-slave. “It is not a place for me or my brothers, Eiko. No, better to stay, better with people who love us. Life is but a brief candle, being a Black Mage.”

“How did he find you?” I persisted. “He made you, didn't he? Nobody's *ever* done that, not since Vivi, and it even failed with Vivi and his children — please, Rain —”

He was shaking his head, tightlipped. “No,” he said finally. “Please, no, no more of those. And — that is another name we do not speak. We do not speak his name. We do not speak the name of the other Genomes, we do not say the word Genome.” He looked downright miserable about being made to say it.

“Why?” I asked, frustrated. “Why all this silence?”

“Because it ends in pain,” Rain said simply, “pain, and a quicker death. He — he is unwilling — but he has such a temper...”

I knew who *he* was. Damned Tango. There was mist involved here, and strangenesses, and secrets. Maybe it was to my advantage that Tango was a completely raving loony — though, with the bruises hurting on my cheeks and throat, it would still be wise not to cross him.

Rain made a soft noise, drawing my attention away from myself. “Why don’t you stay in this room,” he suggested, “and I’ll get you some food.”

My stomach rumbled quietly at that mention. “Thank you,” I said, and smiled; he looked meltingly relieved, beaming, that I was ending my crossfire of questions. I was not going to inflict those upon poor Rain. I was going to inflict them on Tango instead. Hopefully, Rain could get me some wood, or I could break a piece off the dresser; hours of prayer and sanctifying it should give me a useful wand, and *then* I could blast the son-of-a-whore — quite literally — to hell.

Phoenix could get me home after that, now that I knew where I was. Relieved, I began to perk up; finally, a plan! “That would be lovely, Rain. I think I will stay here.”

“The Master will be along soon,” he hinted. “I will get you your food, and look for your glasses. Try not to aggrieve him, Eiko; his research makes him tired —”

I waited until the little Black Mage left, shuffling along. I wanted very badly to immediately poke my head out the doorway and look around, but I realized that if I did, I’d immediately go looking around desperately for an exit. I was too tired, too concussed and too hungry for that.

Instead, I immediately opened the drawers of the dresser and began shuffling through the contents, mostly empty. I was convinced that my being cloistered away in the Desert Palace — ha, Desert Prison! — was not going to last more than a few days now that I had my grand plan.

I was such a little fool.

4. Halfway Down Already

Go Not Gently

Chapter Three — Halfway Down Already

Rain brought me sandwiches with the crusts got off and chicken broth, which confused me slightly. Not just because he'd gotten the crusts cut off, which was how I ate my sandwiches ever since I was about five, but because of the very nature of the food. You don't *get* sandwiches and broth when you've been kidnapped. You get gruel and water.

There was milk, too. "Where'd you get the milk?" I asked curiously, eyeing it. I mean, we were in the damn *desert*. It looked normal and white and perfectly drinkable. Maybe it was from an antlion, though I heard that came green and slimy and ate through floorboards.

He looked almost embarrassed, setting the tray down lightly on my bed and proceeding to fluff up the pillows. “Black magic —”

I almost choked on my sandwich, which had some kind of yan-like meat and mustard and lettuce. “Black *magic*! You can’t make food out of magic! It’d be insubstantial! It’s too complicated —”

“The Master has always been very good with creation.” There was a smile in his voice. “How do you think we exist? Admittedly, we *did* go through some trial and error with the food, but eventually it was learnt that making the separate ingredients fared better in the end than trying to create foods with too much in them.”

I stared. “You do realize this could completely revolutionize the rest of the world? If you can make food, you could — you could feed the hungry — you could do away with poverty — what if you could make other things? What if you could make *steel*?”

“We cannot make metals.” Rain was firm. ‘It is best to run with nature, even if the magic *is* black.’ He sighed. “And even if we *could* save the world, there aren’t enough of us to do so — and no motivation.”

I took a sip of milk. “No motivation?”

“The world is a cruel and stupid and undeserving place.”

Half-jumping, I immediately looked up to the doorway. Rain blushed wildly as if he’d done something bad, and Black Tango nodded curtly at him, gesturing with one hand. The littler Black Mage bowed at me and scampered out, practically falling over his own big feet as he left.

Think Mama. Graciously, I shifted aside to make more room on the bed, pulling the tray with me. “Won’t you join me?”

With a deeply suspicious look, he folded up his wings so that they cloaked his back. Gods, every time I looked at him he still made me want to wet my pants. All black and leather and ancient studs, as if he’d been hauled out from a coffin. The wings frightened me, too, black angels’ wings.

I offered him a sandwich. He took it and folded it in half absently before taking a big bite. I quietened the urge to giggle, remembering Vivi, remembering me feed him if only because it looked so very odd, that food disappearing into nothing.

Poor Vivi. He used to eat my food. He'd be so polite about it. "I-it's *great*, Eiko," he'd choke.

"Is this really real food?" I asked, taking a careful sip of the broth. It *tasted* real; I had expected some kind of aftertaste, the taint of magic. It didn't just taste real, it tasted wonderful and I was starving.

He looked at me, then back at the sandwich. "Yes."

"Made from *magic*?"

He fiddled with the insides, half-poking at the meat with a gloved finger. "You know, Lindblum Princess, there's books about a world where there were millions of Black Mages, and cities that ran all on magic. And White Mages and Black Mages lived together, and nobody was lonely nobody ever..."

I gave him a few moments to pull himself together, mostly because I was in no doubt that if I interrupted his spiel to do anything that resembled a snigger at his lunacy he'd take half of my face off.

"They killed us all, you know." Back to dry sanity. No tears. "They only let your kind survive because you were useful. Those with black faces had far too much power, in the end. No, Carol, me and

mine will do no saving of the world. It granted us no mercy before.”

“What do you want, Tango?”

He looked at me, slow, golden eyes brilliant crescent moons, calculating and fathomless. He smelt like cinders. “I want my children to live.”

That stopped me dead.

It stopped me because it was no snide thought-about comment; he made no hesitation, and there was no politics behind it. He was any mother with babies, he was any parent, with the curse of the Black Mages obviously on him. I wanted freedom. He wanted so much more. My too-tender heart practically wept for him, for one reason only, for one memory and one boy —

Vivivivivivivi —

“And I want all others to die,” he finished, really ruining it all. For extra emphasis, he ate the sandwich.

“Why?”

“You think Black Mages can live in this world?” He shook his head. “It never ever worked, lindenbloom. They killed us and killed us and killed

us, and now all that remains in their memory is the thought of the army that invaded Burmecia and Cleyra. Fear's a jump across to hate. Fuck the people. Fuck the rats. Damn *all* of them to hell, because the only ones that deserve to live live in here."

"Your world at the expense of ours?"

He looked at me, much amused. "Wouldn't it be a better world?"

"It needs balance."

"Black breeds grey breeds white," he said, annoyingly cryptic.

"Well, you've just stabbed yourself in the foot," I snorted. "Going after Lindblum — blowing things up — Zidane's just going after your blood now. If there was ever any hope for a world where you can *both* live, you wrecked it."

"So I kill them all, won't I?"

Quietly, I drained my milk, setting the tray down on the ground. *Funny time for manners, Eiko*. My hands were shaking at the placid conviction in his voice, at what *could* be. Such a waste. Such a damned waste. "I won't let you."

He turned to me and there was pity in his eyes. “And how will you stop me, Princess?”

Habitually, I punched him hard in the stomach.

After all, I’m not an engineer for nothing. Part of the syllabus is going out drinking with other engineers in the bad kinds of bars where there’s big chunky guys who make Amarant look almost unthreatening who usually went and approached me and said something like ‘Now what’s a gel like you doin’ in a place like *this*?’ or ‘Hey, pretty, what’s your Stellazio?’ which prompted me calling them rude names and starting a barfight.

Obviously, all the barfights held me in good stead because, unexpectedly, he flinched and grunted in surprised pain. Looking death in the face, I immediately leapt up and made for the door.

He recovered almost immediately. I had only made it out — faced by a huge, drafty hallway, above a towering staircase down and dizzying rooms upon rooms — when he came after me, darting out with frightening quickness for a mage with big clumsy wings. Tango took to flight and tackled me from behind, making me land hard on the remnants of a rug on the cold stone floor and wailing in more childish heartrending fright than anything else.

He got off me — a strange weight, leather and feathers — and turned me over roughly in his hands. I glared at him, angry and bewildered and I just wanted *home* now, as he stared down at me.

Finally, he pulled a pair of glasses from out of his jacket and dropped them on my chest as he got to his feet. With complete silence, he vaulted himself over the edge of the ledge to the staircase and left my line of sight, wings spread.

That was my first attempt at escape.

“So what do you wanna be when you grow up?”

Spoonful of custard and cream poised in the flight to the unseen mouth, before devoured after-pause. “I don’t k-know. What do you want to be?”

“Vi-vi! I asked you first! That’s cheating!”

“Well, I’m already grown up,” he said reasonably, pulling his hat tighter to his head in an action as familiar as fire. “I have kids.”

“So?”

“Only grown-ups have kids.”

*“They get them a **different** way, though.” Superior and supercilious. “It involves kissing. You were kind of more like a cicada. So what do you want to be when you grow up?”*

“... a fireman?”

*“**VIVI!**”*

“I’d be a good fireman.”

“You don’t want to be a fireman!”

“Well, they’re awfully neat.”

*Admittedly true. “You don’t want to **be** one, though.”*

“I want to be... happy. Like Zidane and Garnet.”

Cherry pie devoured thoughtfully. “Happy’s easy.”

Surprisingly, “No, it’s not.”

He’s right and we both know it. We’ve seen too much and felt too much in these past years to know otherwise, especially him, especially me. “What do you want to be other than happy?”

“I’ll be a Black Mage.”

*“You’re already a Black Mage. **Duh.**” Because he looked immediately hurt, I deigned to put an arm around his shoulders, cozying up to his warmth. “You can be a Black Mage as well as something else. My mother’s a Red Mage and she’s a wife and she’s the Lady Regent.”*

“... t-that’s what I want. A family.”

“You have Bibi and your other children and the other black mages. And you have Zidane and Garnet and Amarant and Freya and Quina and Steiner and you have me. And you had a grandpa, like I had. That’s more family than a lot of other people get.”

“... not a mother, though...”

“I’ll be your mother,” I volunteer immediately, charmed. “And I can dress you up and wake you up in the morning and cook for you —”

*Immediate horror and thankful downing of another spoon of trifle. “Eiko, you can’t be my mother. You’re younger than **I** am. Sorry,” he apologized.*

“Hmph.” I watched the lower half of Quina bustle around the kitchen. “Well, Mr. Boring, I’m going to be a beautiful lady. I’m going to be the most beautiful lady in the world.”

“What about Garnet?”

*“She’s a **queen**. I’m going to be a beautiful **lady**. And I’m not going to wear skirts, either.”*

“But beautiful ladies wear skirts.” Just a hint of teasing in his voice.

“...okay, that’s it. You twerp. I’m going to be a fireman!”

And both of us, dissolving into giggles.

I remember anger, when he died. He could have at least told me goodbye in words better than ink.

If I had any hopes that because of my little stunt Black Tango would leave me to rot, they were dashed. Rain mixedly scolded me and sighed over me the rest of the night, with the unsaid implication: you were lucky he didn't just *kill* you.

I hated being afraid of him. I hated the sudden sympathy I felt in instances, all because he reminded me of Vivi. He *wasn't* Vivi, and he couldn't ever be Vivi Orunita for me; I needed to keep that in mind.

He was one of the Waltzes, confused and long past the line of death that should have come to him earlier, a monster. Able to reason, but a determined killer. Worse than Kuja, in a way; at least Kuja had been mostly pandering to his own whims, unfocused on his half-role as the Angel of Death. Black Tango was so focused his mind wasn't one-track; it was more single railed airway, with large arrows pointing towards, 'goal'.

When he left me I didn't stop shivering for a full half-hour.

In the end, though, I persuaded Rain that I wasn't about to fall down and die due to the horror of what had just happened to me and he left, leaving me to resignedly take the chunk of wood I had carefully pulled from the back of the dresser drawer and meditate. If I started sanctifying it then, I ought to have it ready by the next full moon to start doing proper spells; I had once been among the most powerful White Mages in the world and magic ought to have been like piloting an airship, never forgotten. I had filled my head with diagrams and designs and mathematics and forgotten magic.

I wanted my wand and I wanted my mother and I wanted my father.

Tired and drained from the encounter, from the day, from everything that was sinking in, at last I crawled into my bed and pulled the covers over. My sleep was fitful; understandably, for about an hour after I had determinedly shut my eyes and given myself up into the night, I woke up again to see golden lamplight as Black Tango patiently sat beside my bed. I was so frozen and exhausted and confused that I didn't reach for my glasses, staring and wondering if I had stumbled upon some strange nightmare.

"Tango?" I muttered.

"Go back to sleep, linden-bloom," he said after a while.

"Not with you *watching* me."

We both stared at each other for a while, like babies when you sit them down in front of each other who discern that the other blob is human.

"Tango," I eventually said.

"Linden-bloom."

"Why are you sitting here?"

"I like watching you sleep." He cocked his head. "Your breath goes in and out and your feet kick out

from under the blankets, and you wriggle around like a grub and your hair knits up. It is very... alive. Sleep feels like death a little but it doesn't look like it."

"So you sleep, then?"

"As much as a Black Mage can sleep."

"... Tango."

"Linden-bloom."

"... Did you know about Vivi?"

Another long silence, this time frozen, and I was afraid I had insulted Tango for the last time; I was too sleepy to care, caught between unconsciousness and consciousness, and if I was going to die I wasn't really going to feel it. It would have been comfortable, dying in that bed.

"The prototype was," he said, "before my time."

"Oh," I said, stupidly.

"But I know of him," Tango added unexpectedly. "I know all too well, about the secret, the humanity-loving doormat-fool."

“Vivi wasn’t a fool.” I closed my eyes again. “He was clever and wonderful and sweet and — not like you. Black Mages aren’t about killing. He knew that.”

“Black Mages have *always* been about killing and death and decay. He didn’t know that. Why do you think they named us Black?”

“So why don’t you say his name?”

“We don’t speak the names of the damned around here,” he said curtly. “Not baby-dreaming no-winged no-death castrated blackballs, dying, dying, making something from nothing, stupid and foolish and unwittingly destroying — everything — everything has always been destroyed and made to flee now into the cold dark death of the world.”

“I think you need more sugar in your diet, Tango,” I said sleepily.

I thought he might strike me, raising his hand, but he pulled the blankets up to my shoulder and I could feel fireheat through his gloves. Leaning his head down, he rested it for a split second by my side, then stood.

“Sleep well, Eiko,” — and it was more like an imperious order; and he left.

I found no rest any more after that for almost an hour, wide-eyed and head in disarray, and then I fell to it and slept like the dead.

5. No Angel

Go Not Gently

Chapter Four — No Angel

I woke up late and groaned into my pillow, unnaturally warm; another blanket had been laid over me in the night, and the smell of something beside my bed eventually won me over from sleep to hunger. I opened my eyes blearily; another glass of milk at my bedside table, and a bowl of porridge — but, oddly, steaming happily within a blue flame. I reached out to touch it — it felt quite warm — but I never got burnt; I devoured it all like a ravenous thing and was licking the spoon when Rain came in.

“Good morning, Eiko,” he told me cheerily. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay.” I delicately stopped licking the spoon and set it down in my bowl. “... I miss my home,

though, Rain. Tango... I never can tell if he's going to kill me or not."

"He does, admittedly, have issues —"

I snorted at the winner of the Understatement Of The Year.

"But he's softening over you," Rain said unexpectedly, hat bobbing and lamplight eyes bright. "I do believe that... he might let you go. In the end. After it's all... over."

"... What does 'over' mean, Rain?"

Rain didn't answer me. He busied himself dusting nonexistent dust off the dresser and cleaning my glasses on his sleeve.

"Rain, what's Tango trying to do?"

"You know what he's trying to do, Eiko," he said evasively, setting my glasses down, selfconsciously adjusting his big floppy hat. "He is trying to make a world for us."

"At the expense of mine?" My brow furrowed. "At the destruction of everything else? Rain, why won't you stop him? It's not right, no matter how you cut it."

“Maybe not —” And Rain straightened up to look at me, golden eyes bright and clear and serene. “But it’s all I’ve ever known, Princess, and... I love him. I will go where he leads me.”

“Wading through blood.”

“If needs be.”

A little smile appeared on my lips as I pulled my glasses on, the weight of them familiar and reassuring. “... I should have remembered Black Mage loyalty.”

He picked up my bowls and he smiled, eyes crinkling up at the corners. “You do understand, Eiko! I may not — approve — but I will always love. Love is, after all, the core of all magic.”

I groaned slightly at the sweetness of the sentiment, but Rain just chuckled to himself, waddling out with my plates. I licked my fingers for the trace sugar and pushed the blankets aside, standing up.

“Well, Eiko,” I said to myself brightly. “Time to see what we can do today.”

It was just a chunk of wood, almost as long as my forearm, half-polished on one side. I didn't even know what type of wood it was; it was real wood, though, and it would work.

Rain promised to take me to water, under the pretext of bathing — though Gods knew I needed a bath. I was starting to smell like a real engineer. For now, though, all I could use was sunshine — and the Desert Palace had enough of that, in thick dry whiteyellow streams coming through my window. I sat with it in my lap, gripping it hard with one hand, and I prayed.

Carbunkle, holy protector, come to me. I have no emerald. I have no moonstone. I have no diamond. Come to me. I bear only wood of the earth and the love in my heart, o Eidolon. I know you're there. Come to me. Consecrate.

Fenrir, bringer of decay, come to me. I am maiden. I am virgin. I know you were not ripped untimely from me, sucked and drawn — please, I know I have not Called, but come to me... Consecrate.

Phoenix, lifebird, come to me. Answer my screams. You know this place of death, Phoenix, we have been here before. Come to me. Consecrate.

The chants rose from a soundless tongue, the effort and the force of my prayer and desperation practically driving me to tears. It was need and fervency more than the calmness my Grandpa had taught me, the same kind of desperation when I was first learning to Summon and practically tearing my Eidolons out of myself like organs.

Madeen — Madeen, motherfather, Mog. Come to me, my love, enfold me. Oh, Madeen, please, I need you so much. I'm so alone. I'm trying not to be afraid, but I am. Come to me. Come to me. Come to me.

Consecrate.

I stopped, then bit; my teeth eased down on the wood, working up a splinter, until I cut my mouth and I tasted copper and the paleness of the piece was stained pink with my blood. My prayer was just another heartbeat in the back of my head as I clutched the wannabe-wand and stared, hoping, hoping, my every cell a fervent shameless *please* —

And then the place where I had bloodied it shifted, and grew a flake of smooth bark. I touched my tongue to it, my mouth; the wound sealed over, a sore instead of something open.

It was a very small step, but it was a step where before I had not got legs.

Rain took me later through the Palace to get some clothes for my bath. I was slightly disappointed; we only had to go down a few featureless winding corridors, nowhere where I could potentially scout for escape routes or vehicles. The little black mage took me into a room with just closets, a huge gilt-rimmed mirror at the end and intricate paintings on the walls; magnificent in its unashamed opulence.

“Just pick whichever clothes you want,” he piped. “They’re all clean. We keep away the moths. We make our own clothes out of it all, for the new ones too. Clothes are awfully important to a Black Mage.”

“They are, aren’t they?” I grinned to myself, remembering Vivi’s thick cloth coat, how much care he took of it. Crossing the floor, I opened one of the sliding doors; there was a thick scent of cinnamon and lavender and camphor to keep away the moths. The materials inside were just as opulent as the room; velvets and silks and satins, as well as the delicate, incredibly light fabrics that the desert-

nobles dressed themselves in. “It’s not a bother if I take anything?”

“Of course not.” Rain delicately cleared his throat. “If you want underthings, Eiko, they’re in the drawers of that cupboard over there, but...”

“But?”

“They don’t seem to be made for females.”

I pulled one garment out, looking at the cut of it; male, flamboyant. I crossed over to the closet that Rain had gestured to and carefully pulled open one ornately carved drawer; I pulled out something bizarrely made, realizing it was just a tiny pair of shorts, and realized I was rifling through Kuja’s underwear.

It is a very levelling thing, rifling through your once-enemy’s unspeakables. I started giggling uncontrollably, picking up another pair, making a face at the green — and string-skimpy — silk. So *this* was what the Genome had been wearing under that skirt. My giggles turned to hysterical laughter once I started locating pairs with discreet — but bloody *hell* — embroidered flowers.

“I’ll, uh, leave you to it?” Rain said, in deep confusion, and left me to it — ‘it’ turning out to be

the biggest belly-laugh I'd had in months.

When my tears of mirth had subsided — and the flowers stuffed at the back with a vow *never* to be looked upon again, lest I got mental images. The clothes without Kuja in them were far funnier alone than when he wore them; Kuja had an air of cultured delicacy, of beauty that went beyond gender, his extravagance and strangeness when it came to clothing and himself never taking away from his danger. He was a man, and he was a man with very pretty hips for a man, and liked to show them — but his power burnt your tongue off.

Still. Gods. *Flowers*. There was even a little hole for his tail, the one that had been discreetly hidden under his clothing. How could I ever have nightmares about him again?

Tossing between the utter unholiness of wearing Kuja's underwear and going without, practicality eventually won and I took one of the pairs that promised to be the least uncomfortable. There was another shirt — blue, like cornflowers, with buttons ending just below the breastbone and cut away to show off the midriff, but it would suffice; there was also a large square of gold cotton I could use to knot sarong-like around myself. That would do,

something I could move in that would not catch, the engineer's requirement. If I made any larger exploration into the man's clothing, I would be sitting around all day.

"We get all our bath and washing-water from hot springs," Rain bubbled to me, leading me down yet another corridor, an enormous stained-glass window painting us rainbow as we walked. "There's an oasis just by — creating water's quite hard at times if you want a lot of it — so we don't want for anything."

He should have been a travel consultant.

"Rain?" I asked thoughtfully, before he went into how many bedrooms the Palace had or the comfort of the location. "Where are all the monsters?"

That stopped him. "Monsters?"

"There used to be monsters in the Desert Palace. Kuja's guards."

"Oh, we cleared them out," he said dismissively. "Their nests and everything. Sometimes they breed in the basements, the old laboratories, but we get them all. We never killed the guardians of the palace — they don't hurt us — but you've got nothing to fear, Eiko, don't worry."

“Except for the head monster controlling it all,” I muttered.

Rain turned momentarily deaf out of politeness, ignoring my statement. I always had gotten in trouble with Mama for saying things like that, to politicians. Instead, he waved to another figure coming down the hall, his arms full of books; it was another little Black Mage, Rain’s double, though with different Black Mage raggedy-patch clothes.

“Hullo, brother,” Rain greeted him affectionately as we passed; the Mage looked in abject curiosity at me before acknowledging a belated, “Hullo!” as we walked on by.

“How many mages here?” I whispered.

“‘Bout a hundred.” He adjusted his hat, thinking about it carefully. “About. Give or take for Stopping.”

I swallowed. “So Tango hasn’t been able to counteract that problem yet.”

There was a gentle smile in Rain’s voice. “He’s been trying. He’s been trying for years. But you can’t Stop the Stopping, in my opinion. I don’t think it was meant to be — but if it was, he’ll do it.”

You can't Stop the Stopping. You can't kill death. "So then... he just makes new batches, over and over?"

"Sort of." Rain's voice had gone drifty and slightly cagey; he changed the topic by traipsing down a little flight of stone stairs, pushing open heavy doors and lighting a torch by the opening with his hand. "Here, Princess. You can bath here."

More a small pool than a bath, large and rectangular, steaming lightly with dark water; I couldn't see where the water came from, but I suddenly didn't *care*. There would be enough time to investigate and puzzle over the plumbing and hydraulics later. There were a few folded towels and a cake of soap, and I suddenly felt more grimy than I ever had done before.

"I'll leave you to it," he said delicately, even as I was dumping the clothes in my arms by the side and dipping a testing toe into the water. I didn't even answer, too busy slipping into the hot water and ducking my head completely under. He shut the doors, and I luxuriated.

"Well," I sighed, "this isn't so bad."

I was being treated very well, more in the style that I had been treated to at home than anything else. I felt rather as if I was on some kind of holiday at times; intensely afraid at others. However, my busy hands and busy head would ensure that I would not be happy for long as a kept thing, kidnapped as my mother had been in turn, my days filled with being coddled by — an admittedly affectionate — Rain and menaced by Tango. I needed to finish my wand, Summon, and get out of there.

I wanted to find out a number of things first, though.

Diving to the bottom of the pool, I absently felt for any kind of plugs or holes. I found one; too small and useless to be any good to me whatsoever; I abandoned that halfhearted attempt to perhaps crawl through the pipes and went back to floating before I groped blindly for the soap. I lathered it through my hair eagerly, dipping it back as I sighed in relief. There was a slight breeze coming from the open window, letting dry sunshine in; it was a sweet contrast to the hot water of the bath.

Wait, open window?

“You’re very pretty, linden-bloom.”

My blood ran cold. I slowly lowered myself into the water until I was submerged in to my neck; then I turned around to look at the wall. Tango was sitting in the alcove by the window, wings folded and hands set in his lap. There was something red and sticky dripping from his skew gloves. Slowly, I forced myself to stand straight again and ignore his presence almost totally, soap travelling over my throat.

“I have to bathe like birds do,” he said conversationally. “I roll myself around and around and around and then I beat the dust off my wings. I don’t like the water. You can see my bones.”

“I *don’t* like you watching me, Tango.”

“Why not? You’re mine to watch.”

I repressed a full-body shudder. Let him keep his delusions if they saved my neck. I could see my reflection in the choppy water; it was purple-dusky from his hands the day before. “I still don’t like it.”

“I’m bored with my work,” he carried on, as if I hadn’t spoken. “I hate numbers. They march in my head like little ants. Not like big ants, antlions, those are like headaches. There’s one in the sand beneath

us — I can hear it screaming. Screaming, screaming, screaming.”

“Are you crazy or sane?” I asked tartly, scrubbing over my arms. The soap smelt like cinnamon and chamomille. “I can’t tell half the time.”

That got a dry chuckle, a tipping of the hat and a slow relaxing back into the wall. “I can’t either, Eiko Carol. Probably both. Sometimes it hurts so much that I can’t think straight, and then I wake up all bleeding mist-blood.”

“Can’t you talk to me without *scaring* me?”

“I didn’t think you got scared.”

“I don’t, but —” I made a noise of exasperation at the gloating smugness in his voice. “If you’re going to stand there and watch me wash, at least make interesting conversation!”

“All right,” Black Tango said, unexpectedly. “Tell me about Cornelia.”

Completely confused, I stared at him for a few moments; surely he could not mean the Cornelia I knew. “Zidane’s daughter?”

“Yes.” His voice was thick with some emotion I couldn’t name. This was territory I had to tread

carefully.

“She turned eight a few months ago.” I turned my back on him, leaning back slowly into the water, rinsing my hair. He wasn’t even paying much attention to me, or my nudity; I doubted I was ever going to get possibly ravished. “She — she looks like Garnet. Garnet’s got long dark hair, and big brown ey —”

“I know what the elephant’s daughter looks like,” he snorted. “Continue.”

“Cornelia has blue eyes, though. We call her Elia. She — she wants to be a knight, a bit like Beatrix.” I closed my eyes, remembering my almost-niece, scrubbing the soap over my stomach and lathering up my small bony boy-hips. “She’s got a tail, and her summoner’s horn’s a bit small, but it ought to start being useful later. She doesn’t care for anything but swords. She’s very sweet.”

There was silence, then; “She’s healthy?”

“As a chocobo.”

“And she’s beautiful?”

“Very beautiful.”

I should have said that she was ugly and sickly and dying.

“I often wondered,” Tango said slowly, “why Zidane never Stopped. Ku... Kuja Stopped. I thought that — perhaps he had been made different, the superior Genome. Maybe he had something in him that made him die easier.”

“Did he?” I asked despite myself. I didn’t want to think about Zidane stopping, dying; he still held one of the softest parts of my little-girl heart, a dearly beloved hero.

“No.” His voice was deeply bitter. “Kuja and Zidane were the same flesh and blood. The Waltzes were the same, as the Black Mages were the same. Kuja died when Zidane lived because life is fucking unfair, unfair *always*.”

Cry me a river, Tango. I couldn’t help getting a pang, though, somewhere; “Why do you hate him so much? All he could do was be what he was. If it wasn’t for Zidane, Gaia would be overrun by —”

“Black mages.”

I forged on. “It wasn’t even like he wanted Kuja dead, in the end. He told me so.” *I didn’t want anyone dead, not in the end, Eiko*, he’d murmured to

me. I just looked at him dying there and how it felt with his weak fingers in mine and how it felt in me to watch him ebb away and... I wished things had been different. So very different. You know?

“You think I wish Zidane dead for Kuja’s sake?” The mage snorted at me again. “I don’t. I never. I don’t want Zidane dead for what he was, Carol; I want him dead for what he was *not*. There was no angel of blessed death for me. There was no right. There was no blooming flower of happy endings. I’m going to kill his daughter when he watches and eat the look on his face.”

The hatred roiled inside him, dark and wormy. It all had to be about him, *his* vengeance, *his* pain. Why had I thought that, perhaps, it had been about his creations, his Black Mages, Rain? “I hate you, you malicious little freak,” I said bitterly. “You’re even worse than your father was.”

Tango crossed over to me, kneeling by the side of the bath, tilting up my chin with one gloved hand and leaving something that felt sticky on the underside of my neck. “I know,” he said tenderly. “He made me to be. Goodbye, linden-bloom. I need to get back to my numbers.”

He turned abruptly to jump out the window, taking off with a snap of his wings like he always did; an antlion's scream followed in his wake, and I shivered in bathwater that had suddenly gone cold.

6. Not Knowing

Go Not Gently

Chapter Five — Not Knowing

Seconds turned to hours, hours turned to days, days turned into weeks.

Most of it I spent in hopeless helpless boredom, pacing the floor of my room down, my brain alive with plans to get out. Small catches I spent talking with Rain, who was gentle and good and kind and took me down to the enormous kitchens to have me sitting up on the sideboard to watch like a small child. He used to make cinnamon-sugar-crisps for me, and I ate them piping hot and sticky in my fingers as we talked about life and the weather and chocobos. There were other Black Mages who talked to me, sweet never-naive things with big hats and eyes, and in a fit of originality I called them Cloud, Sun, and Tide. There was another I called

Rainbow Moonshine Seaspray, but everyone got muddled trying to remember the name and in the end we called him Shiny.

The mixture of tenderness and violence with which Black Tango treated his Mages, his little ones, frightened me at times. He would just as often stroke their hats and smile endearments than kick them to the side, hardly able to bear looking at them as he stormed past. He was the same with me, a stormy-weathered bastard, though sometimes he sat with me for long silences as if he didn't quite know what to say.

On rainy days he would sit on top of his library tower and I'd watch from my room as he disintergrated the antlions that came up to bathe in the moisture, fireball after fireball flying from his hands. He could level a city without trying. He *would* level a city without trying. Please not Lindblum, please not Lindblum, please not Lindblum...

I used to go down and repair the boiler for Rain when it broke, and it took hours of begging to Tango to give me tools. After I'd done, slick-palmed from fear and doubt, I slid a spanner down my trousers; it could have been useful for later. When I left the

boiler room, *he* was waiting, and he ripped open the front of them with his bare hands to pull the spanner out. He raised it, and I flinched in preparation for the blow; but then he turned and hit Rain with it so hard that he flew across to smack into the wall. He watched me as I walked away with the small Mage in my arms.

I have you, Linden-bloom, he said. *I don't have to hurt you with my hands to hurt you.*

“You *fucker*,” I wept later in my room. “You whoreson, you bastard, you monster, yan-sucker — I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you! Die! Stop! *Bleed!*”

“It’s all right,” Rain croaked, on my bed, voice barely a whisper. “It doesn’t matter, Eiko.”

“He *hit* you! He hit you with a *spanner!*” He was so little, so sweet. In my mind, all I could see was him hitting the wall, and then his coat and his hat and his shoes morphed into Vivi’s, and he was Vivi —

“I’ll heal.” He let out a sigh. “He gets angry, Eiko. He — he cannot stop himself. He’s sorry later.”

“What if he’d killed you?” I raged. “What if you died?”

“He — he would have been sorry later.”

“I’ll make him sorry *now*.”

“I should not have let you take the spanner.”

“Gods.” I knelt by his bed, my chin on the mattress, eyes clenching shut in guilt. “Oh, Rain. It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have tried to take the spanner. I should’ve known he would have done something to you. If you’d died it would’ve been on my head. I just want to go home. I can’t be here any more.”

“I know,” he murmured soothingly. “I know. But you’ve got to be, Princess, ’till he lets you go.”

Or until I killed him dead, pumped him full of Holy. I would. I would. I would.

Rain shook his head, seeing the hate in my face. “Be at peace, Eiko. We love you.”

“I love you all back,” — and I did already; and I wept into his glove.

Loving the Black Mages hurt like a knife, and I suppose I did it at first for all the wrong reasons, wanting a Vivi in them and not getting one. Vivi was lost to me for ever, always, dead and gone and I'd never gotten over that. My mother had said that children were resilient, I would be all right, but I wasn't; nobody who knew Vivi ever was again, really, in this tiny place in their hearts. The unfairness of it all, the hurt and the horror and the love all mingled, it bored away until you were forced to shove it into the back of your head and only weep on his birthday night and say to the darkness, "He would have been fourteen —" "He would have been sixteen —" "He would have been eighteen —"

He came to my birthday, my very first birthday with Mama and Papa, with Garnet and Freya and Steiner and the rest. Quina made me a special birthday tea and Amarant even came. (Amarant's gift smacked of last-minute shopping; it was a bag of candy, some gil, an empty inkwell and his old set of Poison Claws. Freya smacked him and hollered, "You *cannot* give a little girl a present like that, you thickskulled idiot," and they had a fight, which was inordinately entertaining for a person my age. I hung the claws up on my wall, much to Mama's dismay,

and waited excitedly for another set next year. He gave me more candy and a couple of Potions, which was both inexplicable and disappointing.)

But Vivi came with a little wrapped parcel and a bunch of wildflowers, hat bobbing and voice blushy and I'd never recieved *flowers* before, that was very grown-up. His present was simple; it was a bead necklace, cheap and green and pretty, but I never really took that necklace off until I was fifteen. I lost it, then, it was loose when I was working on a turbine and it fell off over the dock and into the city. I was in half-hysterics, frantically crying over my lost bead necklace, my gift from Vivi. I think, big girl I was, I'd crept into my mother's lap and just howled.

It's strange, you know, but I've always been sentimental. I shouldn't have been. Too many years of my life were spent growing up among Mogs wild in the rocklands, and I stole what I needed to live and in winter, I ate some things which make me sick to the stomach to think about now. There shouldn't have been any *room* for sentimentality. But there was, there always was, and almost obsessively I waited for a handsome white knight to come and take me away and make things perfect again like when my grandfather was alive. But when my white

knight came, he was more grey and dirty and grinning. I loved, still love, Zidane — in a primal little-girl way, he'll always be my shining idol. But I don't think he was my knight.

Very few people get knights. I'd rather be like Beatrix or Freya, and be my own knight, than have to rely on somebody else.

Not getting ahead of myself this time; getting behind myself, mapping out my past. Just as bad. Moving on.

Re-learning the spells was like cutting over a tattoo that had faded; it was slow and painstaking and it was agony, bleeding a triumph every time a Cure popped to my fingers. My Eidolons weren't talking to me — though the noise of their rumbling whispers inside my head got louder every day — but magic slowly bloomed again. I set up little obstacle courses inside my room — too afraid to work on living things larger than bugs, the Black Mages would have told Tango in a heartbeat — and practice. It was not a case of relearning how to cast the spells, all of which I knew like the back of my hand; it was a case of pulling the mana out of myself and focusing again. All too often it all ended in tears and frustration and fizzling sparks.

The Summons would come in time. I was past sixteen, so the damn things had been free to fly away from my fingertips — but they hadn't been extracted, so I could reach out to touch them. I used to lie in bed at night and hunger for the look on Tango's face as I Summoned Fenrir's blasting magics, jumping on Phoenix to pip-pip tally-ho out of there with Black Mages riding with me. Then I would come with an airship, and I would bomb the Desert Palace until he was *fragments*.

Bloodthirsty. I was not my mother's daughter.

My wand had blossomed flowers; tiny, washed-out pink things, just buds, smelling like apples. I kept it besides my pillow at night, under my covers where Tango couldn't see if he came flying through my window like a great black bat. The scent was fragrant and rich and gave me — if not good dreams — blankness, delicious nothingness, no nightmares of half-realized black shapes in the gloaming. My prison was dry and dusty and held a graveyard of palace hangings, and I was used to deserts — Madain Sari was a rocky outcrop with bugger-all in it — but I was yearning for trees and water in a way I never had, even as the city girl in Lindblum. Maybe it was because I *couldn't*, now, when if I had just dragged myself away from my schematics

months ago I could have been grasping pine needles in moments.

“Hey,” I whispered to the wand. The leaves rustled in a wind that wasn’t there, the wood smooth like silk and alive in my hands. You wouldn’t think it had once been part of a chest of drawers. “How’re you doing?”

The wand didn’t answer. I wasn’t far gone enough to expect that it would. Instead, I drew out a kitchen knife — Tango hadn’t found *that* in my supplies, a vegetable-cutter, small and bright — and readied myself for another uncomfortable round of what I had dubbed Body Begging.

Holy. Holy. I wanted to jump all the other steps like a cheating leap in hopscotch, I needed *holy*. I needed what came after the entire soul screamed out in plea to everything pure and good on the planet, alive and beautiful.

“Here is the blood from my knucklebone.” I cut the back of my hand, waiting impatiently for the crimson line to ooze, rubbing it over the wood and watching it stain. “Here is the blood from my throat...”

Here is the blood from my eye and mouth; here the blood from thigh and skull. Here is the blood of my heart. Here are my tears, sweeter than blood...

They say you shouldn't touch another mage's wand or racquet or staff; it's polluting to the magic and the vibes. In reality, if everyone knew the purifying practises, you wouldn't want to touch them anyway — those things are spat on, sneezed on, bled on, wept on, and much worse. All the icky sanctifying magic cooties a wand could hope for go into a good one. Forget Ice Rods and Fire Rods — we're talking about universal Magic Rods Of Flu.

Imbue me with something better than all this, cleaner than water and hotter than fire, going blacker than black magic to the pure dark velvet of the night sky. Bleach me green, bleach me white. I'd offer pearls, but I have none —

He thought the scarlines at throat and wrist and shoulder were something different. He touched them and laughed; “Oh, Princess, don't. Such a messy, messy way to die. If you want it quick and painless, touch me here —” and he reached into the darkness of his face. I'd shoved him away, feeling nauseated, and wondered later what kind of devouring death he held next to his eyes.

The first virgin fall of snow; the first rose on the first rosebush on the first day Gaia bloomed. The first breath...

One of the pink blossoms opened in a silence that was perfectly, icy-cold still. Something like frost crept up the petals, bleaching it white; it puffed stardust into the air and shivered. The blood and the wetness and the spit disappeared into the wood.

I hesitated, then kissed the wand with trembling lips and set it down. I wanted to immediately dance around hollering, “Hurray for me! Hurray for me! Who’s the queen of the world? EIKO’S the queen of the world!” but that invited curiosity. Besides, I wasn’t six any more.

... well...

“Who’s the queen of the world! *Me!*”

I was always so triumphant about the littlest things, in those days. I suppose I just needed something to cling to.

“What’s in the room down the west wing at the back, Sunny?”

My legs were dangling over the kitchen counter, bare and free with my thighs tucked into things that were a bit like wide, skimpy, violet culottes. I was still into raiding Kuja's wardrobe. There was a feather boa in one of his drawers, and I strung it over the back of my bedpost. It seemed to worry Tango.

Sun stopped and looked at me, golden eyes wide, greyleather hat absently adjusted with his hands. He was busy kneading dough; the Black Mages were adorably hungry little beggars. I'd seen Rain earlier, creating flour, and watching it trickle out of his hands was more wondrous to me than the first Summoning of Alexander. What they could do, to feed the hungry —

"West wing at the back?" the little mage echoed me. "Oh."

"At the back," Shiny agreed, slipping something into the oven. "It's... Don't worry about it, Princess."

"Don't worry."

"Better not to worry."

"At all." Sun passed some dough to me; I jumped down and began rolling it out so I could make a

crisp. I turned to look at them, though; their faces were worried, tense.

“Do you think he’ll hurt me if I go?” I suddenly asked, translating the hesitation in their faces. “Kill me?”

There was half a sigh. Shiny came to the fore, shaking flour off his gloves, every movement slow. “The Master... does things, Eiko. And you make him angry.”

“Worried.”

“Sick.”

“So sad.” Sun shook his head, hat bobbing. “He goes around with it inside his stomach, and vomits it out.”

“He’s crazy,” I muttered, rubbing sugar into the dough. “He needs help. Lots and lots of help. Preferably accompanied by electric shocks.”

“When everything’s done,” Shiny said dreamily, “he’ll be okay again. He’ll build us houses out where it’s all green and foresty, and he won’t wear black any more, and he’ll dance and sing. And he won’t get angry, and he won’t get sad, and there’ll be nobody to hurt him or for him to hurt.”

“When everything’s done.” The other beamed at me, golden eyes glowing. “We’ll all be together, Eiko.”

Something in the sunshine of their words made something in me ill. They tugged, hot and heavy, and I moved away from my unfinished dough. “I, I need to go to the bathroom,” I apologized, and then I hurried off.

The light was blasting through the stained-glass windows as I ran, colouring my skin ruby and topaz and emerald as I darted past. The halter top I’d stolen from the wardrobe tried to slip off my skin, too big, not meant for the cut of my body; I was far less powerfully built than the delicate-strong Kuja. I held it to myself, moving, past the gloomy corridors, past the windows where I could hear the whistle of the wind and the antlions calling, and into the end of the west wing.

When I reached the end, the simple little door in the darkness wasn’t locked. I pushed it open, silently and easily.

Inside was a garden.

The ceiling was clear glass; the room felt hot to my skin, warm and humid. The floor abruptly ended

to a vast expanse of grass, blazing green, soft and satiny to my bare feet. Little purple and red and blue wildflowers dotted the lawn, with bright flowerbeds over at the side, and at the end was trees.

I thought there were Black Mages hanging there, for a moment, stuck fast between the branches like corpses. But it was just hats, and their clothes, and their shoes; and beneath the bright leaves there was shining clear fruit with something blue in them.

Tango, like a crow, was sitting in the grass just before the trees started. His wings were tucked up on his back like a bird's, and he looked big and black and unnatural as he sat and fidgeted with the blades of grass. Dreamily, half-blinded by it all, I walked up to him.

He didn't turn to look. He just kept on as I stood behind him, rolling a blade of grass between his fingers until it was pulp. "Linden-bloom," he said eventually.

I stared, at him, at the trees, at the fruit and at the clothing. "... This is a cemetery, isn't it?"

"Pretty pretty place, for death," he agreed. "I used to think death was pretty."

A powerful wave of pity swept over me. Damn, damn, damn my heart. “Tango...”

“I saw him, once.” His voice was a queer husk. ‘Hungry. Silent. Emptiness is black, you think? It’s blue, all blue, all... blue.’ Tango ducked his head down. “I’ll meet with him again.”

My throat was silent. The silence that came over me when Tango was near was too often like a spell; the chords in my throat felt swollen and clumsy, not able to give proper words.

“Have him down on one knee, this time,” he said, voice a terrible smile. “Down on one knee. Gaia my altar, all running with blood. Then I’ll strangle him with promises, and he won’t walk among us again, all my little little ones. No more blue. Just black and gold and green.”

Mute, I watched as he stretched back, black-leather gloves flat on the grass as he pulled his head back and howled. It was a long, mournful, alien note, and he beat palms on the grass as he wailed his dirge.

I dropped to my knees by his side. Tango was shaped wrongly for a Black Mage. He wasn’t short and stout like the proverbial teapot; he was long and

thin and he bent wrong, folding down like a twig as he sat. He smelt like decay and leather and old burnt-out fires, but woodsmoke, a clean sharp smell. “Tango,” I whispered, as the note died.

“Better to Stop,” he said thickly, head shaking almost spastically. “Whywhywhy? Better. Why can’t I Stop?”

Sickened, I reached out to touch his shoulder, light and gentle and hesitant. Despite the heat and the leather it felt cold to the touch. Looking up at my face, Tango’s expression changed and he reached out to grab my wrist until the bones felt like they were crunching.

“Don’t touch me, Eiko Carol,” he snapped. “You don’t know, you never-knew. You still don’t understand.”

“You never *tell* me!” My voice was a raised, frightened thing, tight and taut with pain. “Let *go* of me, damn you! All you ever do is hurt!”

He dropped my wrist abruptly, letting it slip from the smooth leather. I immediately cradled it to my breast; it was sore as all hell but I didn’t think it was broken. Just a bit sprained. That was a relief.

Tango raised his hand and I flinched, expecting death; but he traced fingers over my shoulders, over the drooping silky material of my too-loose shirt, down my sternum until I flinched away again. Then he took my cringing wrist and pressed it to the darkness of his face to kiss it, and it burnt.

“Go away, linden-bloom,” he said, with detached finality. “Go away.”

I pulled myself to my feet, swaying, not knowing what to say; the only thing that could usually be on my tongue to him were bitter insults, which was all he expected.

“I hate you,” I managed, emptily; and then I walked back to the kitchen with one wrist limply dangling — it’d be all bruises later — to silently eat my finished crisp. Sun and Shiny said nothing, as they bandaged my hurt hand; and were kind enough to talk of other things, as I ate, and cried big fat tears that rolled down my cheeks.

“He’ll be sorry, later,” Shiny eventually whispered to me; and that just made me weep harder, and I didn’t know why.

7. Run From Me

A/N: Have I mentioned how much I love my readers yet? I love you all. You're wonderful.

To answer a question of Dagger's and to confirm klepto-maniac0's thoughts on the matter of "linden-bloom": Tango thinks he's inordinately funny, and is playing off Eiko's city of Lindblum to get the pet name. She's the princess of Lindblum, and cities with 'blum' as the last name I take to be a corruption of 'bloom' — Lind naturally translates into a type of flower, a linden. Therefore, Tango brings out all his wit and charm and calls her 'linden-bloom'.

(Eiko's not laughing.)

Go Not Gently

Chapter Six - Run From Me

He woke me up midmorning.

I'd slept badly the night before; it had been a week, maybe longer, and my hand hurt when I lay in bed and tried to close my eyes. It was healing well — just a little sprain — but the days were melting into each other like my cooking. I resolved to start a calendar, to count them, but I was almost frightened by the passage of time.

How long had I been here?

How long was I going to stay here?

Were my mother and my father looking for me? Well, yes, of course, it was an idiotic question — unless they were dead. They could have so easily been killed in the attack on Lindblum, in any more subsequent attacks on Lindblum — I sure as hell didn't know where Tango had gone or been, and he never told me in too many words what he did when he left. Neither did Rain, or Shiny, or Tide.

I couldn't know. I couldn't ask. If he killed my parents, he was dead mage walking. He was dead mage walking anyway, when I was through with him —

He used to sit on my windowsill at night, blocking out the moon, staring out at the desert sands as if

they held some wondrous meaning I couldn't divine. Every time I sat up and watched him, he'd shake his head at me, golden eyes unreadable crescents; so I used to lie back down, and get used to it, and breathe in his dusty-feather smell. Sometimes he used to touch my fingers, and bend them very very lightly back as if he wanted to break them, and then saw the whiteness of my knuckles and left. I watched him once, after he dived out my window, and saw him absently flutter and hover like a firefly to let out exquisitely crimson fireballs down at the screaming antlion pits below. The night would smell like charred flesh, and sometimes Rain used to come and huddle on the covers with me.

Tango woke me up midmorning, a rough gloved hand on my shoulder, until I rubbed my eyes and made my angry noises that meant I was waking up. Then he pulled away from me, rustling, walking like a bird, then pacing back and forth wildly in a circle. His wings looked dusty, and his black clothes I could see had burn marks on them, scorched; bits of soot fell to my floor. Two Black Mages were huddled in the doorway, watching, obviously afraid.

He was clutching something in his hand, muttering wildly in the back of his throat, before flinging himself down to crouch and cup it between

his fingers. The crazy closed-in animal display was irritating me, because I was as frightened as the Mages; I swung my naked legs over the bed and groped to pull a shirt on.

“Tango? Tango, what’s *happening*?”

“Beautiful,” he grunted. “Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful.”

“What? What’s beautiful?”

He stood up abruptly, one hand still clenched shut over something, only giving me a moment to glimpse that it was something that shone. “The morning is, linden-bloom. Your deadfall eyes are. Blood is —”

“Don’t fuck with me,” I growled in warning, long past the nervousness that Mama would come around any corner to ding me on the ear if she caught me talking engineer’s talk. I wish she had. “What’s *wrong*?”

He started to pace again, long leather frock-coat swirling around his ankles. Tango always dressed in scarecrow chic, and I don’t believe he ever changed his clothes; long black leather pants, ancient coat studded with cold little iron knobs as trimming, black shirt and black waistcoat and black cravat and

layers upon layers as if he was trying to pad his own shape. Black boots, too, and black gloves. Big black hat. No colour, ever, apart from the discolouration of the stains. “So little,” he said distractedly. “So so little.”

My blood had gone from cool to cold, tight with worry; what had the crazy bastard gotten himself into? Was he hurt?

Why on Gaia was I worried he was hurt, I thought distractedly, he hurt himself every day and nine times out of ten he had done it to himself. Rain had told me the whispers of razorblades, and of bloodfeathers they found broken on the floor, and of Tango lying prone on the ground —

I shook my head furiously, pulling on my sarong and tying it into a knot around my hips, finally decent enough to grab his arm and shake it. I didn’t have fear about that, now. I’d long since gotten used to slaps and backhands and fists in my stomach. His arm fell slack, and something fell, shining, to the floor. Like a cat, he scuttled and tumbled away from me, pressing himself into a corner; I bent down to pick up the thing.

It was a necklace.

A pendant, of the Royal House of Alexandria, in fact. I knew the shape. Like the Falcon Claw of Lindblum, but just a little differently shaped; my father and my mother and I all had Falcon Claws. Garnet and Zidane had them, too; and so did Cornelia. Hers was a little different, though; it had a diamond-star in the center, for some sentimental reason I'd forgotten —

The necklace was bloodstained. With stiff fingers, I wiped it off the telltale diamond, tracing the wet red lines of it so that it rubbed off on my hand.

“Where did you get this.” It wasn't really a question; my voice didn't tremble.

“From around her little neck.” His voice rang out clear and dreamy again. “I had to pull it off, linden-bloom. She was going the colour of forget-me-nots.”

“Elia,” I said.

He'd gotten in at Elia. The fox had gotten into the chickens, had got into the little chicks, my niece. I was her Aunt Eiko. I had been enjoying my role as the *fun* aunt, who slipped her candy — but it was her birthday soon — Cornelia —

“You didn’t tell me about the little tail.” His wings rustled, agitated. “Or the little horn — she looked like you, when you were that age...”

I wasn’t listening. He’d touched my niece. He had probably killed my niece. He’d been into Alexandria Castle; why hadn’t Garnet taken care of him, Zidane? Were we all that helpless? Was it all that hopeless?

He’d gotten in at the children. “Shut up! Shut the fuck up! Why? Why! How could you go after babies when you’ve got your own?”

Black Tango turned around to look at me, standing up, drawing himself to his full height. He had no features, but there was a smile; insane, broad, soft. “Because I could, princess; because I could. I wanted to see. And then I could. What will you do about it, love?”

My insides were boiling, a switch flipped, my blood gone cold; I felt like sobbing, until I realized what the little switch was. I hadn’t felt this sensation for so long; it had been years, hadn’t it? My organs and brains felt turned to ore. Straining, gasping, as Tango watched in fascination, I pushed for the change; I fell to my knees as I submitted to the rising tide, watching my fingers spark and glow icy-

green-white, as if I was being lit up from the inside. I was being lit up from the inside. Oh, Gods, it felt *good*, powerful, a release, my tears wanting to be from fury and joyfulness both; something popped, half-painful, from my back, and I watched as two white feathered pearlescent things stretched from my back. I never had needed my grandpa's Wings, after all.

The Black Mages — Tango, and the two at the door; was that Tide I saw? — watched, horrified, as I stumbled to my feet, Tranced. My forehead felt much heavier; a Summoner's horn, grown to full majesty.

A noise; from Tango, a sigh, as if he had been watching fireworks that had just come to an end and only now was letting go his breath. "Oh, Eiko," he whimpered. "You're so lovely. Don't make me hurt you. Please. Please."

"Oh, get the hell out of here," I spat, reaching underneath my mattress and brandishing my makeshift wand. It gave a little sparkle of flowerdust as I held it, rolling and flipping it between my fingers, taut all over. I was so tired of feeling the pain that I could have fallen over. "I'm going to hurt *you*, you monster, once and for *all*."

His expression was queer, and for a moment, I thought he wouldn't do anything; and then he moved towards the window and pulled a short staff from somewhere inside his coat. It had a squiggle in the end, in ancient Black Mage style; not the large rods I'd seen in the Black Mage Village, with latticed golden fretwork circles at the ends. He shattered the window with a blow and crouched on the windowsill as the wind blew in, hot and dry. "Catch me, Princess," he called out, and took off.

"No!" Tide hollered as I clambered to the windowsill, absently noting that my hair had turned bright green. "Eiko, don't! Please!"

"I love you," I promised him. "Tell the others I love them too, all right?"

"Don't!" he shrieked. "Eiko! *Eiko!*"

I jumped out of the broken window, having never flown properly in my life.

The antlions were screaming, and I was falling. My new wings flapped wildly, and suddenly I shot upwards as I was caught in an updraft; it hurt, all those new muscles, all the strangeness. Tango was fluttering, hovering quietly in the sky, wings flapping with ease and grace; I was getting buffeted

around like a sparrow in a storm. My wand spun around, leaves brushing my hands, as I tremblingly casted Float.

That did it. My legs found purchase on thin air as I was held in place, now just trying to stop the hot desert winds from attempting to rip my clothes off.

“How did you bring that in with you?” His voice was a lazy shout. “I stripped you down, linden-bloom! You brought in nothing!”

“Stop talking!” I shouted back. “I’m tired of hearing you talk, talk, talk!”

His hands spun as he threw his head back, steeped hat a tall black halo, and I saw the fire in them form even before he threw the huge red heatwave at me. My mind racing, my fingers tapped my magics, pain and adrenaline a better key than hours and hours of forced remembrance. Shell, magic-protector, the bubble of no-magic around my body — I still cringed, hands held out rigid with the wand, when the searing ball spattered on my invisible shell. It might have singed my fingertips a little. I didn’t care.

“That’s the best you can do, princess? Shell yourself? I draw all over white magic, blossom. I

bleed black ink over it. I bite it.”

“Bite me.”

“As you wish.”

We came together with absolutely no elegance. The strength of his huge ragged wings rocked me back in a quick somersault, only Float keeping me up, my own so-very-new ones from my Trance beating weakly — stronger now — and carrying me into him. I elbowed his stomach. I shoved my wand into his chest; I kicked and I bit and I scratched and I grabbed like a wild thing, until his staff, his curly-wood Black Mage staff, tumbled down and down into the desert as I locked my arm around his head and pounded his head.

Tango’s arms scrabbled for purchase, his holler of pain and surprise barely registering in my ears as I hit him with everything I had. We rolled down together, dropping about forty feet or so in the air until he managed to shove a well-placed boot in my abdomen and kick me off him.

Somewhere on my body, I was bleeding. I felt the hot trickle of it on my stomach, the bruises on my head. I didn’t mind, the Trance still burning me on like a firework.

*Cornelia. Cornelia. How could Garnet and Zidane let the wolf in the door? Why are we all so helpless against him? Why is he doing this to them? To you? Why is he doing this to **me**?*

“You’ve gotten stronger,” he panted.

“Since when was I weak?”

“I’ve held your hands in mine and half-broken your wrists, princess. I’ve pinned down your body and crunched your little bones —”

“Go fuck an antlion,” I spat, and leapt forward to start my assault once more.

He raised his hands; my assault was stopped almost immediately as my Shell was breached and every tooth chattered in my head as lightning arced through me, hot and burning and a high electric scream in my ears. My fingers were more than singed as I gripped my wand, falteringly falling back and slowly floating through the air as I spun it forward. He was laughing as I cast reflect-magic, his own hands moving in more magic-signs — and then he was engulfed in his own Blizzaga, the chill of ice-magic startling in the hot desert air.

Tango’s scream was not music to my ears. It was high and a kicked-animal wail, bitten-off and

leaving him dipping lower and lower in the sky as his wings faltered, heavy with ice. He shook it all off, writhing as he flew, and groggily my wings managed to beat again.

“I should have killed you, Eiko Carol,” he called.

Was there enough magic in me? Yes. *By Madeen’s grace go I; you’re not listening, my love, my life, but bless my spellcasting anyway* — I stuck my wand out, feeling the wind caress my cheeks. Air, earth, fire, water, wood, metal, darkness.

“I could have killed you, Eiko Carol!”

Green bleached to white. I had enough in me. I could barely see Tango in the hazy waves of magic starting to surround me; he was a ragged little crow, a black seagull sailing on the wind, wings beating out a broken rhythm to stay alight.

“But I *didn’t* — father, I’m sorry, soso sorry, I couldn’t, I’ll do better, I’ll do better, won’t fail this time, they all go to feathers in my fingers Father why do they bleed so much they’re not supposed to bleed —”

My voice was a cracked shrill scream, even as he slowly rose higher, wings pinned back as he made his descent, and I tremblingly let go the power of my

spell a few seconds before he hit me. *Eat Holy, Tango.*

He tackled me by the waist and it engulfed him, a burning engulfing wave of light whiter than white and both of us scattering pearls as his pounce shoved all the air out of us. We were falling back in an arc, back towards the Palace, and he pushed me out ahead of him as the kinetic power shoved us — him burning, me limp —

back into the stained glass window of the lower corridor, ruby and peridot and lapis and topaz exploding in shards around us as we tumbled down down down onto the hard marble floor. I felt my back ripped to shreds, the glass scratching fire over shoulders and thighs and feet as, completely unprotected, I fell to the ground like a ragdoll. Black Tango was still burning even as he rolled off me, his moans that of a man consumed by fire, spasming even as my Holy spell receded off his clothing.

My Trance had ended, burnt me out. My wings had disappeared into nothing; the green tinge of my hair had faded back to violet. I had to hold my wand in my teeth, barely able to focus my power as my dispel spell rolled over the room. I was half-fainting, but at least my reflection barrier had gone; that left

the way for a pathetic cure that barely closed any of my hundreds of cuts, still bleeding, but at least I could open my eyes.

Tango was a whimpering wreck a few metres away from me, tangled in himself, feathers on the floor and his hands working over himself as they desperately tried to brush off something long gone. I rose up, my feet dragging over the floor, and kicked him viciously in the side. The last rags of my shirt fell to the floor, my clothes a matching wreck for my body.

He just curled up harder. I kicked him again.

“How’s it feel to be the one on the floor?”

“Don’t,” he croaked.

I kicked him again, harder, though I was swaying on my feet and ready to fall. “Why should I show mercy to you?”

“No...”

“Exactly.” I stomped down, over where I thought his pelvis was, wanting his being to crack and crumble. The power was as sweet as the pain was bitter, tasting like blood in my mouth. He just gave another pathetic bird’s chirp of pain.

“No —”

There were footsteps. The Black Mages. I should have been more conscious of them; imagine the scene, me beating their father to pulp with both hands as they watched, terrified, torn between who to be more fearful of. The room was shrouded with shadows. At least Tango hadn't crashed us into one of the basements; not the ones filled with monsters, and I was half-dead and kicking down a three-quarters-dead mage.

I kicked at his head. His tall steeped hat fell; it skidded across the chipped marble in the dark. Something pale fell from it in strands, and Tango ducked his head against his chest, the pale thing falling all around his shoulders and his clothes.

His voice was a muffled shriek, a child's one, like a tantrum. “*Don't touch me!*”

There was no blackness. I had expected shadows. Where was the previous darkness? He was sobbing, uncontrollably, body still twitching as if he was braindead. “Don'ttouchdispeldon'ttouch...”

The pale stuff lifted, like a curtain, as he raised his head so that I could see his unmisted face.

I had the sense, at least, to run.

Not just run, but *sprint*. Down into the darkness, anywhere, catching a glimpse of the small frightened mages pressing against the wall as I made my adrenaline-spurred getaway. My fear was pushing me on, but my legs gave; bleeding and helpless, I fell to the floor, the cold stone of it no comfort to my burning cheeks.

I knew when Tango stumbled down the corridor after me, hat jammed on his head — as if that gave him any protection! — tripped, and all that pale stuff spilled out again as his hat rolled away. His gloved hands groped for it, but then he abandoned it to sit back up, shaking his head as if to clear the moths; that pale stuff was hair, hanging down in long moonlight threads.

I'd seen those locks before. They'd been immaculately groomed, combed to perfection, sculpted to falling feathery spikes on an equally immaculate face. Strength going, Tango crawled towards me, my death, and now I was willing because now I *knew* and I had to stop crying because it was blurring my sight.

The face was dirty and bloodstained. The skin was the whiteness of the things who live underground and never see sunlight; the eyes were

those of madmen, not focusing properly, rolling every which way until finally they focused upon my face. He pressed weak, limp hands to my shoulders, in a mockery of pinning me down; both of us were zombies walking, comatose chemicals. I tried to pull my face away, my body away; but it wasn't working, he was *there*.

Face hadn't changed. All high cheekbones but no crushed berries to rouge the cheeks or lips, no powders, but more bone; emaciated, thin, wild, beautiful and terrible and foul. The eyes had changed; they were golden like darkened suns, like beaten metal, like his eyes before as the Black Mage, amber like a wolf's. His lips were split and chapped.

"Don't touch me," I gasped, knowing now why, I shouldn't have touched him, oh, Mother, he watched me *naked* — "You bastard, you bastard, you bastard —"

"Eiko." Why had I not listened to the voice? Why was I so blind?

I forced all my poison into my mouth. If I could have, I would have spat fiery death into his mouth, cast a spell with my tongue. "Kuja."

“No, Eiko,” — and he was weeping suddenly harder than I was; “It’s Vivi.”

8. Sins Of The Fathers

Go Not Gently

Chapter Seven - Sins Of The Fathers

What excuses I made after that.

He's not Vivi, he's a mirror-monster, he's Kuja come again, he's a mimic, he's a mime, he's a foul foul trickster, he's a Waltz, he's Black Tango, he's something horrible that crawled up from the bowel of the world and, and, maybe I died, maybe I'm dreaming, this cannot be real, let all other things be real but not this thing, he's not Vivi —

They put me in another bedroom, because they had to fix the window in my other one, and my cuts and my hurts and my one terribly sprained ankle were bandaged by Rain's gentle little hands. He came and sat by my bed; so did Shiny, and Tide, and the others, and they would smooth my damp violet locks away from my forehead, but I would not talk. I

stared up at the ceiling, a glass doll lying in a cradle, eyes blank and mouth a silent bleeding gash.

And I only spoke when he came to me.

“Get away from me.”

He was still the same Black Tango. His head made quick, bobbing movements, like a frightened dying bird’s, limbs jerking absently as if he had forgotten what to do with them; mercifully, he had respelled himself, his face the same black shadow with golden topaz eyes.

It had been a lie. He was not Vivi. Of course Tango would lie; he lied and lied like a cheap watch, would do anything to poke holes in my head, put his finger in my mouth and throat and make me vomit. Anything. Lie. Lie. Lie.

Lie.

“Eiko.”

My name will not touch your filthy lips. “Get away from me.”

“Linden-bloom.”

“Get away from me, Tango.”

“You don’t know. You never-knew. You had no idea. You have no idea. You sit in your little palaces and every year you go and put flowers but it doesn’t *matter*, my people a dream and a theory in textbooks, and where was I, where was I, he said he’d always *be* there for me —”

“Get away from me.”

His words ended in a long, shuddery cry. When he spoke again, his words were dry, the tone measured, unexpected sanity.

“I never meant to take you with me, Eiko Carol. The hell you entered is one of your own devising.”

My voice was a broken rasp. “I wish you’d killed me. I wish you’d kill everyone.”

“You’d give up the world,” — and I already had — “just for the memory of one little boy?”

“Get away from me.”

His blow was sharp and it fell mostly on my hands but the poor bruised things would be double-blue, already hurt. I was already used to being hit. “You still don’t understand, linden-bloom.”

He was not Vivi.

“You’ve got to eat, Eiko.”

Rain wiped porridge off my lips. I had refused to open my mouth that time; it had just seemed like such a waste. Maybe if I never ate again I would die, and dying seemed like the *good* option.

“You won’t heal if you don’t have good food in you. And, look, your ankle looks much better today.” He attempted a little laugh that ended in a sigh. “Oh, Eiko, if you’d use white magic it’d —”

“No.”

Skillfully, Rain popped the spoonful in just on my ‘no’; I spluttered in indignancy, some of it dripping down my chin, only for him to wipe it off again.

“*Rain.*”

“You’ve got to eat, Eiko,” he repeated stubbornly. “It’s no good you doing this.”

I sat up, away from the aggressive spoon, so that when I talked he could not attempt to choke my mouth full. “Why? Why not?”

“It’s no use holding the Master to ransom.” He held the spoon up again, his voice soft and warm like ashes as usual. “He’ll just... do things, Eiko, to make you eat.”

“He couldn’t do *anything* to make me do *anything*.”

“He can hurt us in front of you.” He bumped the tip of the spoon on my lips. “He can kill us in front of you. All of us. Just to make you eat.”

Completely stunned, I stared at him. Tango wouldn’t. He couldn’t. But that was exactly the way he would think, wasn’t it? Hurt others until I agreed to do his bidding. Like with Rain and the spanner. Like with *everything*.

“Maybe,” I said, “maybe it would be better that way.”

“Now you’re beginning to think like him, Princess.” Rain’s eyes were grave. “Please eat.”

“Rain?”

He still held the spoon up, my lips parting unwillingly to accept a small sip of the hot oat mash. “Yes, Eiko?”

“Take your hat off?”

Rain hesitated, putting the warm bowl down on my lap; and then he took his big hat off, leaving me with his darkness, features wreathed in shadows. I pressed forward into the shadow with my hand, just touching it; it felt icy-cool. There was nothing more.

He put his hat on again, and this time, he smiled. "I love you, Eiko."

I swallowed my mouthful. If my tears dripped down the spoon as I ate, with chapped lips, he did not notice or he did not comment. Rain could have been a child of Vivi.

But *he* was not Vivi.

He came to watch me in the bath. I didn't know whether I cared any more. I didn't watch him, crouching, over in the corner; he beat his wings sometimes against the walls to get the dust off them, as I mechanically soaped, as the hot water lapped at my skin. My hair was growing longer, raggedy; Tide had offered to cut it, but I hadn't agreed. It seemed too much bother to keep myself neat.

I had almost liked him, when he was just Black Tango. Certainly, I'd felt pity. My love for Vivi had

clouded my judgement.

My love for Vivi had always clouded my judgement.

A hot wind howled outside. I contemplated dunking my head into the sterile boiling water and dying, but I was too heartsick and limp even for that; I was broken-down, my gears and shifts rusting up, my mouth and lips stilled in silence.

“You don’t have to do it any more, Tango,” I said suddenly. “You don’t have to lie.”

He turned around, casting shadows on the cool stone walls, dust motes dancing around him in a bright halo. “You’re craven, Carol. You’re stupid. You’re ignorant.”

“Your face.” I dipped my hand in the water, and let it trickle through my fingers. “You don’t have to wear that mist any more. You’re not even a Black Mage, are you? You’re one of Kuja’s left-behinds. You’re a Genome. You’re, you’re something he left down in the basement here, and you grew, like a mould. A mushroom. A fungus. A disease.”

“Eiko...”

“You’re crazy. You know that? You’re past crazy. You’re yanshit goddamn insane, and you think you’re Vivi —”

“...E-Eiko...”

“— Vivi never would’ve touched her, and he never would’ve touched Lindblum, and he never would’ve touched Zidane and Garnet, and he never would have touched —”

“Why I was born.”

I stopped and looked up at him. His voice was floating, soft, a feather.

“How I wanted to live...”

The words were easy. I’d read them over and over.

“Such sweet saccharine nonsense, linden-bloom. What we did together, was it so courageous? Zidane walked among us as an angel of death, down in the dark places, his heart a crippled worm of blackness worse than Kuja’s. Worse than Garland. He danced the dance of death and everything he touched turned to dust, linden-bloom. We walked in Alexandria and it exploded. We walked in Lindblum and it exploded. We walked in Burmecia and it exploded.

We walked in Cleyra and it exploded. We walked in Terra, the dead planet, and it died. Do you truly know the things Zidane did, down, down, in the dark, with his hands and feet and mouth?”

“Zidane was a *hero*. Shut up! Shut up!”

“Zidane was a *liar*!” He spat the words like they were magma. “He was an actor playing at being a human! ‘Living life to the fullest’! It’s not true when you have no life to live, linden-bloom, when you’re a monster like my children and me! Black Mages? Pah. He taught me life did not last forever, and it was a lesson well learnt only now. I refuse to lie down, linden-bloom, I refuse to Stop, I refuse to be alone in my suffering! He pays the price!”

There was silence. He seemed to be sucking in breath; I just stayed in the bathwater, my toes on edge to touch the floor. My voice was a dead whisper.

“So what do you plan to do, Tango?”

He shrugged, as if it was nothing. “Parley with Death. His name is Necron. The fact that you know means nothing to me. Less than nothing.”

“No, no, I meant...” What did I mean? My voice was a monotone. My blood felt too hot for my veins.

It had all gotten too much, too many directions, too many things in my system. Necron? Necron was gone. He could not bring Necron back; sometimes I still saw him in my most evil of nightmares, but he was gone. But Necron, the dream of dying and nullification and evil, that wasn't the point, the point was — “Why are you still lying? You could've gotten Vivi's letter from, from anywhere. Zidane's got it up and framed in the Great Hall in Alexandria. He died. You said he died yourself.”

He was taking off his coat. There were clothes beneath it, coats upon coats, vests; he was unbuttoning them all. He was thin as a heartbreak, peeling off gloves until I saw hands, white as the underbellies of things that lived far beneath the earth.

“And I did not speak untruth, Princess. He died.”

“So why?” My voice was trembling with tears. I had not slept. “Why did you tell me —”

“What do caterpillars become, honey-sweet, when they cocoon?”

“... Butterflies. Tango, stop playing with me —”

“What do Eikos become, honey-love, when they grow up?”

I tilted my head to look at him. He was unbuttoning the last vest, and I saw the flash of snowskin; in annoyance, he shook off his hat, and the mist melted away. The face was beautiful and hideous; fine-cut and chisel-boned, like an angel in a painting, the brows pale and the eyelashes paler with huge golden eyes set in a thin, hungry face. It was set about with scars, like a wild animal had tried to tear his face apart. I recognized the marks as having come from fingernails.

Dank locks fell about his cheeks as he worked, half-pinned clumsily up in a halfarsed topknot on his head. He must have had tons of hair, long breadths of it, but it was dirty and dusty and smeared with dried blood. He looked like a wild thing. He was a wild thing.

“They become hard little engineers,” he murmured. “They become all angles, bookread, spiteful and firetongued and dreamless.”

A massive scar bloomed on Tango’s chest, from the bits that I could see; he held his shirt apart and knelt, wings rustling like the wind outside as they folded on his back. It was a burn scar, old and shiny and wrinkled.

“This is where the Third touched me.”

The Third? Black Waltz Three. I pressed my arms against the side of the bath, watching, lumps everywhere. I wasn't going to believe. He wasn't. He said he wasn't. The earth was crumbling beneath my feet.

"But you weren't there." His voice was almost-gentle. "You were not with us yet."

"So that scar could be from anybody. Anything. You could have done it to yourself."

"... Do you still want to be a fireman, Eiko?"

I snapped my head up.

"A little boy stripped naked." His voice turned singsong in the way it usually did, like a chant, light and rhythmic and utterly insane. "A little boy stripped naked, leaving his clothes behind — his coat, his trousers, his hat, everything that had touched the unstoppable death of the things that sprang from his own two hands. He ran naked and screaming through the forest from all the dead things, and he threw himself into the river, and he did not die. And he ate of that which was poison, and he did not die.

"He fled into the deserts and ate things and drank the water that lived behind their eyes. He grew big

lumps on his back, and he hurled himself down on the sand, and he rubbed and he rubbed and they blossomed into birdflowers of black hatefire and he flew with them. And he flew to a temple, where he was welcomed as son and heir, and his heart rotted and died and his mind peeled off like the layers of an onion until he knew what he had to do. The little naked boy dressed himself in black and danced the dance of death, and so called himself after it; and he made his children, in preparation for the harvest of the world, which he had always been born to do. He exists only to kill. He exists only to kill. He exists only to kill.

“Who is that boy, Eiko?”

“I was born the Vivi-caterpillar,” — and his smile was glorious and terrible; “Now I am the butterfly, and I am gone.”

My memories will be part of the sky...

The tears dripped down my cheeks. I gripped for purchase on the side of the bath, shuddering, spasming, my forehead dipping down to touch the stones with my voice a strangled wail of grief. My horn grated against the rocks. Vivi. Vivi. Vivi. Oh, Gods, it had once been a prayer, and now it was a

curseword falling from my lips. “I loved you. I loved you. I loved you so *much*.”

“And now?” His voice was like a little boy’s again; high, unsure.

I couldn’t talk without gritted teeth, pressing my face into the granite. “And now I hate you so much I wish the earth would swallow you whole.”

He’s Vivi, he’s a mirror-monster, he’s Kuja come again. He’s Vivi gone crazy, Vivi dead inside his brain. And he’s died twice over for you now.

Oh, Madeen, how we suffer! We suffer and we suffer.

“And now you know my wish.” His fingers were stroking my wet hair. “Most days, Eiko, the hate’s bigger than the urge to freefall away into nothingness.”

My sobs echoed off the walls, wails of a miserable child, caring nothing that he was touching me or much about anything any more. There was no higher power in that room that day, not for me.

“Hate me, love.” Why did he have to be so tender? It was worse than torture. “Hate me in my own true name.”

“I hate you, Vivi!” I wept. “I hate you!”

I cried in Vivi Orunita’s lap as he softly crooned and petted my wet violet hair. I was nineteen years old. He was twenty-two. He smelt like dust and dead things and ashes as I screamed for years of broken trust, for innocence loss worse than virginity, for sins of the fathers that had been visited upon the children.

The lies had been so much sweeter than the truth. The truth was a bruised nightmare that bled.

He was Vivi.

He held my head and shoulders until it was dark, the night cries of the antlions echoing across the silent plains. I had stopped crying long ago, my mouth a chapped slit, my whole body a headache.

Vivi slid wet hands from my neck, swollen from the water, picking me up underneath my armpits and setting me by the cold side of the bath. If Rain had been and left, I had not been aware, and he had said nothing; we were alone, the crazy black mage and I, and he fastidiously draped a towel over my shivering

body. I had no strength to stand, just sit, clutching fistfuls of rough cloth in my hands.

He touched my summoner's horn, and it was like a bold of Thundaga; I shuddered, fragile like my mother's best china, and he walked away to the window.

"Do you know where Black Mages go," he said presently, "when we die?"

I'd always assumed heaven. Garnet had sat me down in her lap and we'd talked about the better place Vivi had gone to, where the good spirits went, and he was with his grandfather and his children and the other Black Mages.

What a crock of shit that had been.

"No."

"The same place I would have gone, if I had died, linden-bloom." He started to laugh. "Nowhere."

Black Tango — Vivi — laughed and he laughed and he laughed, until he couldn't stop and he had to bang his head against the wall so violently I thought his skull would split, expected a sound like a wet melon hit with a hammer. He merely shuddered, straightened, and set a foot on the windowsill.

“I didn’t kill her, you know,” he said softly. “I left her bruised and broken on the floor, but when I left her and the guards came, her heart was beating.”

“What?” I felt concussed. “Who?”

“Cornelia.” Vivi’s voice was bittersweet. “Zidane’s hateful prize and success. Your niece. I am the child of Zidane’s brother, made with both of Kuja’s hands. Does that make her my niece?”

“Elia?” I felt like a newborn. “Elia’s not...”

“Her heart was beating, linden-bloom.” Another foot up on the windowsill, his hands slipping back on his gloves and redoing his buttons; “My life seems to now revolve around little women who do not die.”

He fell out the window in freefall. My heart was in my throat until I saw him silhouetted against the moon, wings beating from far off.

“How?” I whispered, the tears coming again, my fingers curling up on the ground. I’d cried oceans and lakes and rivers but still I had saline in me left to weep. “How the hell did it ever come to this?”

9. On Stopping

Go Not Gently

Chapter Eight - On Stopping

My mother once told me that hatred felt just like being in love. It was the same crunch of the heart, the same heat of the cheeks, the same searing pain borne up inside your body and pushing at the seams of your insides; but I blew cold like ice, until it thickened and shifted inside me with splintery cracks every time I looked at him.

I'd read the fairytales. The young man who disappears grows up to be the strong, wild, handsome prince; he is noble, and saves, and he's got rippling muscles and long black coalsilk hair which goes through your fingers like water when you comb them through it. He does not become a dirty, blood-soaked, filth-matted, wild-eyed abusive madman who alternately cries and sings in cracked off-key up in the rafters, some half-caught song

about memories. If he does, he does not forget the lyrics and put in words halfway.

Then, perhaps, the little rescued princess found in the desert usually becomes a free, beautiful princess. She is demure and gentle and her skin is like rice powder. She is not a short-haired, hard-edged engineer who draws mathematical calculations in the dust with the tip of her finger with no curves and too many bones.

I really had no idea what to do in those few days, the weeks after I reconciled the little sweet mage of my childhood with the feral-eyed killer of my *now*. I was lost and he knew it; he drank in my confusion. Run away? I could; I still had my wand, and if there was power enough in me to Trance there was power enough to call on Fenrir to bear me over the deserts. But that would mean leaving Rain and the others; and it would mean leaving Vivi.

I didn't know what leaving Vivi meant. Maybe it meant giving up vengeance for a betrayer and a murderer. Maybe it meant leaving the bedside of a lost man. Maybe it meant both.

Sometimes I stared out of my window and wept; and then I stubbornly told myself that it was because of my monthlies, my hormones up in arms and

raging along with the stress. My monthlies were spotty and seldom, though, now; I could be fine one month, then miss another, and be doubled over the next in gut-wrenching pain as Tide and Sunny searched desperately for some kind of herbal cure. I felt thrown off, imbalanced.

Prince? He was more like a demon, an angry spirit leading me a merry dance with me classically powerless against him. I did not go gently. I wanted power; I wanted to smash something into his face again and again, to make him go, to make him quiet, to make him still. *Die, Tango, die* —

It was always Tango I wished death to. The first time I felt *die* on my tongue with his name coming afterwards, I froze; wishing Vivi death?

I was sentimental and stupid and I couldn't help it.

Oh, fairytales. This is your prince and princess. All hail the King Of Monsters and the Queen Of Hopelessness!

May I have the storybook back, Mama?

“How did he make you?” I asked one day.

We were in the kitchen. He was perched on the table that the Black Mages ate on like a crow; he fluxed in and out of ash-covered Tango to white-faced Vivi as quickly and confusedly as my father took off his glasses on his odd days. Rain had made us lunch; I spooned my soup into my mouth, and he ate his directly from the bowl. There had been a long period of quiet between us; he seemed unsure of what to say, and I was all too often hopelessly lost for words. It was communication, but one-track talking.

His eyes lit up; he was human, for that moment, and I could see his huge golden eyes under the shadow of his hat as he ate. (He ate like a pig. He would slurp noisily, a pink tongue emerging every-so-often from his mouth to lick up creamy green from around his lips. It was disgusting.) In full light, he had the strangest eyes I had ever seen; they highlighted violet, the amber of his Black Mage form seeping away, deep beautiful violet like flowers in a meadow. I'd come across that violet. "Do you know, linden-bloom, that your skin keeps notes? If I scraped your arm, just a little, I could take all the little skindust from you and grow bits of you in a dish. Kuja had many dish-children. I was the fourth, sweet."

Fourth. Black Waltz One, Black Waltz Two, Black Waltz Three. And then Vivi.

“If I grew you, then I’d have a new Eiko Carol, all little and shining.” Vivi eyed me, calculating. “I could have a little child-Eiko, if I wanted. All of my own. Your child-hair, your child-face...”

I shuddered.

“... your disgusting child-clothes...”

“What?” I looked up, infuriated. “*What* was wrong with my clothes? My Moogles used to dress me.”

“It showed,” the black mage said obliquely, and took another slurp of his soup. He dug one gloved finger into it to pick out a split pea; my mother would have swooned away cold. “*Yellow*, Carol? Yellow scoop-neck coveralls with the front cut out?”

“You really are Kuja’s,” I snapped. “Snarky bastard.”

Like he could talk. And what was so bad about *my* clothes? Garnet had worn a sleeveless jumpsuit the colour of blighted citrus fruit, and nobody had commented on *that*.

He just shrugged, smirking; I had tensed, expecting maybe a plate thrown at my head. His wings quivered as he settled them again on his back.

“Did you make the Black Mages like that?”

Shiny, Sun and Tide were working in the back, cleaning pots and huddled as far away from us as they could possibly get. The agonized looks they threw me whenever I spat at their Master used to hurt my heart; the way their hands trembled when he hit me hurt worse. Tide was drying a pan, and his hands were drooping; he was getting a sore back, lately, and I often saw the others furtively rubbing his shoulders through his thick cloth coat. What with the way Tango indiscriminately punted his children across hallways, I was surprised that only his back hurt.

It’s funny. When I was angry with him, he was always Tango. When — when I found it within me not to be angry — only then could he be Vivi.

There was a long pause. Vivi — so *different, new, strange* — looked down at his soup, as if he was trying to scry something out of it. He didn’t know how to keep his face a blank; I saw it scrunch up, forehead a network of worry lines before anger slipped to — resignation? “No.”

“How —”

“You ask stupid questions, Carol,” he said abruptly. “Don’t ask them again.”

“I’ll ask whatever I damn well please, and you know that.”

The mage laughed; though he did, often, he very seldom did it out of amusement. Sometimes he laughed at me like it was real, like he found me a very funny joke, and I never knew whether I should laugh with him or quickly break his kneecaps with something heavy while he was distracted.

He raised the bowl to his lips, draining away the last of his soup and setting it down again. With nothing in his hands, he soon fidgeted and pulled off his hat to prod and poke at some flaw on the leather rim. I could see his face clearly; the deep, angry scars across his face, from ear to ear and forehead to chin. There were still reddened scratches over his skin from us crashing through a window. His topknot was tightly bound, usually; but the pins were working themselves free from this one, and had been for weeks. The knot had fallen to his neck, long feathery greasy stained strands touching his cheeks. I had no idea what the original colour was meant to be; what Vivi had was light brown like a

coffee stain, and I had a feeling it wasn't meant to be that way.

I finished my own meal, unable to take my eyes off his hair. So loose, it was starting to spring back to how it normally fell; there was a large, feathery chunk at the crown that had started to stick up like a mohawk.

“Look,” I snapped, finally; “come *here*.”

Vivi blinked like a bird. He had long eyelashes; such long, transparent eyelashes. “Linden-bloom?”

For a man who would hit me across the room without a moment's notice, he was docile to my touch. I pulled him off the counter, hands firm on his wrists; with the mages watching us, utterly shocked, I dragged him over to the other side of the kitchen and the water-pump. “How long has it been since you washed your hair? All right, I bet you don't — how long has it been since it last rained on you? Oh, Gods, we're in a desert, I bet *never* —”

He immediately started squawking pathetically, like some frightened seabird. I ignored him, pulling away his thick leather coat and dropping it in disgust on the floor. “Carol! *No* —”

Pins? There were none. His hair was so greasy it stood up by itself. I pulled away a ribbon, crackly and miles long, starting to unthread it from around the knot. “This is *disgusting*.” It finally came loose; I pulled it all away, horrified, watching the mess of hair tumble down his back between his wings. Discoloured, matted, tangled past tangling, it was like a furze bush; it fell to the back of his knees. I prodded a part; my finger couldn’t even penetrate. My nose wrinkled. “Do we have any scissors?”

“Eiko!”

There was a rustling in a drawer; quick as a wink, Shiny had handed me a pair, bright and sharp. Tango glared at him, and the mage wilted off back into his corner. I grimly threaded my fingers through them; too late Vivi tried to turn around, to see what I was doing, and I grabbed a fistful of his mane.

There was a laboured ripping noise as I snipped through it, metres of white hair falling to the ground as I cut it a few fingers below his shoulderblades.

“There. That’s better.” He was opening and closing his mouth like a fish. Before he could recover, I cranked the lever of the pump down and pushed his head beneath the stream of clear cold

water. I watched, satisfied, as he flailed his wings and gurgled incoherently.

The mages watched in complete and utter disbelief. They'd stopped their pot-scrubbing to watch. I nodded my head at them.

“Sunny? Do we have soap there, love?”

I yanked him out from under the water, keeping him low as I started to lather the much-welcomed bar of soap through his hair. I hummed vindictively as I finger-combed the snarls, less monstrous than before; he slowly sank to his knees in front of me, getting the tough leather of his trousers wet. I think he was in shock.

“I’ve half a mind to give you a bath.” He didn’t have lice, thank all that was holy, but he truly was one of the filthiest individuals I had ever come across. As I scrubbed the strong kitchen soap over his hair, it was like I had dipped it in whitewash. His fair skin came off even fairer when I surrepticiously scrubbed behind his ears, feeling like my mother; he was white like the underbelly of a dead fish. White on white. “I can’t believe how horrible you are.”

“Soap,” he complained weakly, still sounding as if he had been electrocuted. “In my eyes.”

“Nonsense!” It was deep, primal retribution, and I suddenly remembered why. It had been all too many times, back in the adventuring days, when Garnet and Freya had made *me* take a bath. I found this very unfair, as baths were torturous and as Garnet made me take especial care with my knees.

Vivi never had to bath. I’d offered to give him baths until he’d run away, shrieking, “Black Mages don’t HAVE baths!”

Like hell they don’t. Heh, heh, heh.

He whipped his body around, until his face was level with my stomach, angling his wings away from the bitterly cold stream. His glare was baleful. I merely started cupping water with my hands and tilting his head down, starting to rinse the soap away. “Don’t you feel better clean?”

There was a gurgle, in all probability ‘no’.

I gaily squeezed his hair free of water, pulling it away from his neck. He had a pretty neck, now that it was clean. He was generally fifty times more palatable, and he smelled a bit like soap. I suddenly wondered why I had done it at all; it had involved too much touching, warm hands and cold water and soap on skin. I moved away as he straightened up,

wings bristling, still staring at me with something close to awe.

“Why did you do that, linden-bloom?”

“Your hair was filthy. It’s quite pretty, now — you should go see a mirror.”

“There aren’t any mirrors here.”

“Well, your hair is almost white.” I pulled a wet lock of it forward, so that he could see. Quiet, he just let me. “It’s an improvement.”

“Why do you even look at me?”

We stared at each other. The heat was rising on my cheeks. I couldn’t understand why he was looking at me the way he was; like washing his hair held meaning beyond what I’d given. He slowly traced a slightly damp, warm trail down from my temple, stopping at the pulsepoint on my throat and pushing down on my heartbeat. His touch was like a burn.

Suddenly I shuddered; angered and shamed, I pushed away his hand and stepped back. “It’s hard to walk around with closed eyes.”

“Master?” A voice interrupted the cool tension; Shiny, hesitant, tentative. “May we take our brother

to lie down?”

Tide was swaying back and forth on the spot, rocking, as if he couldn't keep balance. Immediately concerned, I moved over to their little knot, pulling Tide away from Shiny and Sun and wishing I could put a palm on wherever his little forehead was. “Are you all right?”

Stupid question. Of course he wasn't. “I'm f-fine,” he stuttered. “I just feel — a little dizzy, Eiko —”

Why was Vivi just standing there, watching? The arse. I threaded my hand into the Black Mage's glove. Even through the layers of cloth, he felt a little bit too cold for comfort. “Come on, angel, let's sit you down.”

“Leave him.” Tango. He'd switched back to his blackmist Mage form so quickly I'd hardly been able to fathom it, jamming his hat over his head as he stalked over to us. There was a queer quality to his voice, monotone, carved completely out of ice. “Give him to me —”

His hands were rough as he pushed through Sun, Shiny and I, pulling Tide close to his body and ungracefully flopping down to sit on the floor. The

adoration in the tinier Black Mage's eyes matched that of all the others when their Master showed them even the smallest bit of fondness. He leant his head against Tango's shoulder; Tango started to rock him, slow. "All over," he crooned. "All over soon."

Unable to stay away, I crept closer to the pair. The other two followed close by, hovering behind me. "What do you mean?" I demanded, unsettled. "What's wrong with him? Is he ill?"

A hand came out, lightning-quick, that would have gotten me in the kneecaps if Sun and Shiny hadn't pulled me back. He didn't even look up to watch me fall squarely on my backside; he just looked into Tide's eyes. The Mages behind me were shivering, almost convulsively. I was starting to get afraid; Tango was softly stroking Tide's shoulder as he curled up in the bigger one's lap, thumb tracing circles over and over again. "Almost over. Then you can have a sleep."

Tide smiled, eyes in happy crescents as he lay boneless there. "Thank you, Father."

It was like lights going out; his eyes just — fizzled, as if someone had thrown water on a fire. They glowed like coals, glimmering, but then there was just darkness. That was the first time I had ever

watched someone Stop, and a disbelieving howl rose from my throat. Shiny's hand latched down more tightly on mine as I tried to fling myself forward.

“No!” he said, and the tears in his voice were heartbreaking. “Stop, Eiko, he’s still got to be —”

It was interrupted when I shrieked due to utter terror. Tango had dug his hand inside Tide's eyeless dead face; he was hissing and tugging and pulling around and his arm was glowing like it'd been dipped in glowworms. Finally, something gave.

Mother, Mother, he never had a mother, I wish I could've been it for him but I wouldn't know how to be a mother if you paid me in diamonds — Mother
—

Vivi curled his gloved hand around something, shaping it within his fingers. He was standing and stalking away, wings held close to his body, and he left the kitchen. Only then did Shiny and Sun let go; they went to follow.

I fell down by my knees by what was left of Tide — mostly clothes; and I rocked back and forth and howled.

It really was like just stopping, you know. Stop. No wonder they called it that. The shutting down of an engine. One moment he was here, the next minute the lights were off. It was just so very much an ending.

My heart broke again, and it was already so full of cracks that there was hardly anything left to reform.

Poor little Mages, always so good to me.

Poor, poor little Mages. Oh, Tide. In one day, and out the other.

I could only sob for five minutes; but it was enough. I took his hat, warm and thick in my fingers, and then I ran out the room as fast as my bare feet could take me; somehow they lead me to the wing on the west section of the Palace, the little door in the darkness and the coloured windows staining my skin as I ran. One was still broken; it showered a hot wash of air onto me as I skidded past, callouses on cool tile.

The grass was still bright, blazing green. Sun and Shiny were standing at the first of the trees with the

strange fruit; there were others there, now. I could recognize Cloud there with them. Black Tango was perched at the top of the tree like an evil crow; black on green. He had one of the beautiful berry-blue shiny fruit in his hands, and he was fixing it to the top branch.

That was Tide?

I moved to the foot of the tree. Shiny looked at me, and then he moved to offer me his shoulders; I stood up on them and swung myself to the first branch. The trees smelled familiar, like something I'd already breathed in; my mind raced as I climbed, careful to only disturb the fruit when my skin barely brushed against it. *Think, Eiko, think —*

You climbed it with them, you curled in at the base. You watched it as it claimed Zidane for what you thought was the last time. Old, old, paradise in the desert plains and it spewed Mist —

Little Iifa trees. I reached the top, my head emerging through the top layer. I'd scraped myself on the bark, and I was panting; slowly, I offered Vivi the hat.

He took it, turning it over and over in his hands.

“This is what Black Mages are made out of, linden-bloom,” he suddenly said. ‘Cloth and dust and souls.’ Leather finger ran down the front of the sphere, pretty as a jewel. “I never was able to make a flesh shell for them, precious. When you try that, you get the one-two-three, the Waltz, hideous and heinous and I pulp them in my fingers when they’re born. No, Carol, these are my children’s materials.” He rocked it with his hand, and started to laugh. “The fruit of my loins.”

He laughed, and laughed; and it ended in a sob. He fixed the hat up on the topmost branch, and wiped my tears away from my hot dusty cheeks.

“I’m going to make it stop, little love.” The Mage took off his hat, and he was Vivi again; still death among the life, all white and smiling and eyes the wrong side of crazy. “All stop. No more tears, no more death. Do you hate me so much now, Eiko Carol? Now you have seen what becomes of my children, every few years? He knew that he was dying. He knew that he was dying from the moment he was born. Is it so much that I want a world where I can have children, and where my children can have children, not skeletons stuck up on trees?”

It's wrong, Vivi, died on my lips. I looked up at him, eyes stinging, clutched to the branches as best I could next to him. "I won't help you destroy the world."

"I can do that part, linden-bloom. I can do that part."

"Let me think of a better way." I pulled myself up, on the branch next to his, feet finding purchase on the rough wood. I was about two heads below him, staring up into his face; his hair was still damp with water, little strands curling over his face the colour of warm cream. I was suddenly desperate. *I have to do this; I have to do this, please* — "Let me help you."

"You'll learn, my pet." His voice sounded infinitely sad. "The only way we can have a new forest is to burn the old trees."

"There's got to be a different way to do it. A *better* way." I licked my lips. "Tide wouldn't have wanted people to die for his sake and you damn well know it, Vivi Orunita."

"A different way? A better way?" Suddenly he was laughing again, and it was cold and clear. "If you can find one, I'll be happy to hear it, linden-

bloom. Crack open your head and lay the ideas out on my lap. You'll soon learn."

I scowled at him, and began climbing back down. Soon he started to wail, a long one full of tremulous grief, and the Black Mages at the foot of the tree let out high sweet noises with him. All I could give for Tide was a noise like a dying dragon, an animal's throat-racked snarl of pain; and then I had to go.

Like most answers, it came in the middle of the night, when I was unable to sleep.

I used to lie on my bed and listen, those nights. In the early days, I wanted to listen for Fenrir, for Carbunkle, for Phoenix. I wanted to get saved, and I wanted my spiritsummons to do it. I didn't know how to rescue myself. When I finally had the means to rescue myself, I couldn't. I was sucked in too deep. Tears on my pillow for Tide. Tears on my pillow for Vivi. Tears on my pillow for *me*.

My grandfather had told me that a Summoner was connected to everything. The Summoners in the old days, they were fearsome and strong; not only the monsters of the world answered their call, but monsters of beyond the world. When you Summon,

you stand over the brink of a very deep abyss. You call into it; you call the name of your Eidolon, that you were given when you found it written in your belly.

You don't call the nameless things. There are many things in that big hole, and if they were Called, they'd rip your guts from your body and wear it as a fetching scarf.

The Summoners of old could call anything with a name.

The thought came to me unbidden; and it made my palms sweat.

Eiko, you're crazy; you're worse than crazy, you're stupid. You overestimate yourself, just like Father always told you. This is like trying to build an airship when you don't have an engine. It can't be made to work, it won't be made to work, and the danger of it is stupid and selfish and foolish —

*I **am** stupid and selfish and foolish! Let me have my moment!*

I stood up; I pulled my nightshirt on, which was big and button-up and made of cool linen. It was meant to be blue; but it was grey in the darkness, and I was naked underneath it as I opened my door

soundlessly. I rolled my sleeves up to my shoulders, and went down the stairs.

He hadn't gone to sleep either. He was in the rafters at the bottom of the stairs, singing softly to himself, cracked and unsettling.

“... in my dearest memories...”

I walked down the staircase, feet making no sound on the ragged threadbare carpet.

“... do you remember killing me...”

He always was shite with lyrics.

“Vivi?”

“... I still believe that you can call — Carol?”

Vivi sounded thick with tears, like he'd been crying. I could believe that. He had more tears in him than entire cities, most days, except they boiled inside him and came out as steam.

“I know how you can do it,” I said.

I didn't have my glasses on; he looked like a vague shadow jumping down from the ceiling until he came close to me. His face was shadowed; his eyes were amber slits as he gathered himself up to

stand. “You don’t, linden-bloom, nothing that I haven’t thought of over and over and over again.”

“Let me Summon Necron.”

The Black Mage stared. Nothing quite beats a Black Mage for staring; big, glossy, pupil-free golden eyes with no relief make for one hell of a gape. Then he shook his head, just once, shivering free of the black mist that was his face and taking off his hat. He still hadn’t rebraided his hair, and it had finally dried; a large feathery portion stood up in the middle. In the darkness with his amber eyes gone violet, he was Kuja come again.

“You can’t, linden-bloom. You can’t even Summon your Eidolons.”

How did he know that? “Give me time.”

“Did you not look at Tide, Carol? Time is not something we *have*.”

“Six months,” I said desperately. “I can do it if you give me six months.”

“You can’t Summon and you think that you can get he-who-devours here in a matter of months?” Vivi’s eyes were flat. “Don’t be softheaded, Eiko, I didn’t take you for a fool.”

I stamped my foot, losing my temper. “I was once one of the most powerful summoners on Gaia, Tango! I was more powerful than Garnet, and you know it! It was just that I was a child! So I’ve lost the power now. Guess what? I’ve been under a little bit of stress! If I say I will do something, I will do it, and I will do *this*! So don’t you dare take me for a fool!”

“How do you even think you can *do* this?”

“He has a name,” I said darkly. “He was stupid enough to give us that.”

He gnawed on his lower lip. It was cracked and bleeding again. Feathered white locks fell over his forehead in the moonlight; he raised a gloved hand to push them away, behind his eyes. “... Five months, linden-bloom.”

“Six.”

“Four.”

“Vivi!”

He stepped away, back into the shadows; his sharply-defined face fell into it, hard and bony and angular. Vivi was a much hungrier, leaner, unprettier Kuja; Kuja had softened his features into

exquisiteness with makeup, long lashes and powdered cheeks and dewy lips that would never have deigned to be chewed.

“Five,” he said, eventually, and he drew back close. “You would summon Death for me, Eiko? You’d call him and fight him? If you fail, the price would be the same as my method of getting him. He would destroy the world, and Zidane is too old and soft to be Gaia’s hero any more.”

“I’ll do it.” I looked up at him, my arms falling from being crossed around my chest to hang at my sides. “But not for you, Vivi. I’m doing it for *them*.”

“You’re doing it for *me*,” — and he grabbed my arms; before I had time to think, he had me up against his body, his leather cold like snowflakes and sending shivers down my ribs. His lips were even colder, falling over my cheeks, again and again. ‘And I thank you.’ Vivi drew his mouth away, eyes on mine; his kiss was on the tip of my nose. “Thank you.” And again, on my chin. “Thank you.” And then —

The inside of his mouth was hotter than his lips, a veritable inferno, mine suddenly and helplessly open to his. He tasted like blood and like tongue and something faintly like sugarvomit; his hands

tightened on my arms until his fingers were bruises and his mouth was a prayer. I pulled away from him, too hard, skidding back until I landed on my behind on the cold tile floor. It felt like my throat was full of needles; I pulled myself to my feet, and spat like a child.

Not even Mama had ever drawn herself up with such ice and dignity. “I still haven’t forgiven you, and I don’t think I ever will. So don’t kiss me again, Black Tango, or I’ll have your bloody *kneecaps*.”

I didn’t look at his face. I fled back to my room, locked the door, and sobbed hysterically on my bed.

My mother once told me that hatred felt just like being in love. I don’t know what *she* was feeling.

10. Leaving You Behind

Go Not Gently

Chapter Nine - Leaving You Behind

I dreamt.

There's a field, with lush green grass and bumpy hills and neat little buildings all set up with the same gentle, tender ramshackle layer-style that characterized the homes of the Black Mages from Black Mage Village; the wind blew threw them, and through the flower-boxes that sat in the windows and outside the doors. There's a hand in mine; I look down to see a little dark-haired boy standing next to me, smiling. The sun rises and the moon fall and the stars come out even as the sun's rising.

The grass is half-mixed with sand — you know the type you get near large bodies of water — and I looked over to see a shimmering lake, glimmering green and blue and white as the waters danced. Vivi

comes, laughing, out of one of the houses; he's dressed in simple drawstring trousers and a linen shirt, hair drawn back in a tight braid, and he's bleeding from his mouth and his nose and his ears.

"Don't worry," he says, before I even opened my mouth; before I even thought it. "It always ends soon, linden-bloom."

"Are we happy now?" I ask. "What did we make?"

He beams at the question. "A home in the desert. Something from nothing. Everywhere it was nothing. We should be proud of ourselves."

It's Grand Lake, the Grand Lake of Alexandria; there are remnants of old docks there, a shipwreck in the middle that's old and ancient and rotting. Beneath my feet there are bits of stone.

"But it's all blood now," I say, because the grass has turned red with it.

"We had to burn the trees," he explains, "to make way for the pasture."

The little boy breaks away from me, and he climbs a tree. I try to make him come down but he won't; Vivi comes and takes my hand, but he's Black

Tango again, all black-clothed and golden-eyed. I take off his hat and I try to feel for his face again but there's nothing there, like with Rain; I gasp, but then he's there again, scar-shod and bleeding.

"Don't look behind you," Vivi says, and then he kisses me hard and long until my bones ache and my toes are curling up on the long grass. When I open my mouth I take out a lavender flower, delicate and pretty. It all feels wrong, and I know I've forgotten something; I stare at the flower in my hand, still wet with my spit.

"I told you not to look," he says, and then the sun falls and the moon rises again and the stars explode.

When I woke up I remembered Bran Bal, and I didn't know why. I remembered the darkness and the pipes and the blank-eyed Genomes and all the fire as Kuja exploded everything around him, bright red confetti of death on a dying world. Then I went back to sleep, and I didn't dream again.

Rain brought me breakfast, and I sat him on my lap and we ate together. He seemed perfectly willing to be held, and have his toast cut up into soldiers, and be treated like a toddler than like a little Black

Mage; he was as chirpy as ever, but if he had been human I know his eyes would have been red and tearstained. He still hurt over Tide; we all hurt over Tide.

“How’d you sleep?” he asked thickly, mouth full of bread and butter.

“Oh, I slept fine.” He must have known I was lying; my hair was like a violet knotty haystack and my eyes had large bags. My hair was too long now; creeping down to my shoulderblades, unwieldy and needing to be tied back, flyaway over my summoner’s horn. “I think there was a storm last night.”

“Maybe it was the Master.” He sugared my porridge, running one gloved finger around the rim of the bowl; it was steaming merrily on the little bluebell flame again. I picked it up gratefully, spooning the hot oats into my mouth. “It’s not rain season yet.”

I tickled him under one arm until he squirmed, laughing. “I don’t know, I think it’s Rain season every day.”

“Ei-ko!”

I ruffled his hat until it fell off; he jammed it over his head, attempting indignance, wriggling off my lap and licking butter-striped gloves. Giggling still at his solemn pouting, I tilted the bowl of porridge and drank it all down greedily until it stained my mouth and nose and cheeks. Eating like Tango, now. Mama would whip me blind.

“What are you going to do today?” he asked, taking the tray and the breakfast things, carefully piling them up in his arms and heavy sleeves so not to drop them.

“Work a bit,” I said cagily, standing up. I’d found some ruched trousers in Kuja’s closet — thank the Gods, though they seemed more thermal underthings than proper leg-covers — and I pulled them on, not bothering to change my shirt. In a house full of little boy-children Mages and the man who has not washed since puberty, my hygiene was getting more than mildly slovenly at times. Not that I had exactly been *clean* back in the days of being an engineer (so long ago: months are years now), but I tended to always wash and wear clean clothes. I wiped my mouth on a sleeve. “Is there anywhere I can work, Rain? A nice, big, empty room?”

“Go down to one of the Ballrooms,” he suggested promptly. “I’ll go check with my brothers, see if there’s one clean —”

“I don’t care about clean!” I yelled after him. Too late: he’d already trip-trapped off, little boots clomping on the marble tiles as he bounced off somewhere down the stairs.

Kneeling on the ground, I opened my drawers again; I didn’t know why I hid my wand now. Vivi knew of its existence, and he still hadn’t snapped it in two over my head. I didn’t know whether he trusted me. I don’t think he trusted himself, most days. The little flowers were slowly, happily puffing white sparkles onto the half-rotting lining of the bottom of the drawer, making it glisten. I tucked it into the top of my trousers and closed the door again. I left my glasses.

Well, I’d eaten my breakfast, I was dressed. Now to dig deep into the fabric of summoning reality and summon Death without having my skeleton seperated forcibly from my skin. All in a day’s work, from Eiko Carol-Fabool. Hurray. Huzzah.

Break out the ticker-tape already.

When the world was younger and the Summoners all grouped together, my grandpa used to tell me, they used to extract Eidolons from every young Summoner as a matter of course; they'd be lost to the slipstream of being, whirling around in the abyss where all creatures of that ken went. The Summoner, to get their wings, would go and Call the Eidolons that were hers or his as a test of power. It's always easier to bring home the Eidolons that were born with you, shared a womb with you.

Calling the Others is a different matter. And when you can't even call your Own, well.

I worked with engineering diagrams; they were safe, comfortable, concrete things, lines and angles and mathematical equations. Summoning seemed like trying to plot a dream. I had no idea where to begin.

So I began, down in one of Kuja's ballrooms (*who did you throw balls for, Kuja? Who did you invite?*) amongst all the dust and decay and the rotting brocade curtains. Things either rotted or dried away out here; Rain was a little desert child, much like I had been, his sleeves puffed and tied at the wrists so that the sand wouldn't get in them. He

was sweeping sand out of the doorway when Sunny lead me down.

“It’s in awfully good condition,” his brother said to me, brightly. Rain loved clean; he loved polishing things, he loved new things, he loved everything that wasn’t dying and dead. I longed to lead him through Lindblum until his eyes fell out from all the steam and brightness. “Most of the Palace is, you know. We even repaired the window you fell through, because the lizards were getting in. Master doesn’t like lizards.”

I thought of Vivi, playing with a lizard in a little patch of sunlight; he never played with his hands, he just watched. He never liked it when I teased ants or spiders or centipedes with a little twig; he liked watching what the little creatures did. I thought of Tango, ripping open a lizard and gnawing on the guts, drinking the eyeballs.

What we did was wrong, Zidane. We should have checked. We should have found him. Should have, should have, should have. Guilt wears weary on your skin —

“You don’t mind if I lock the door, Rain?” If, perhaps, I was overcome with a monster from the deep, it would eat me and then go a-rampaging

through the Desert Palace. I wanted Rain and the others to be safe.

“There’s nothing to lock it *with*, Eiko.” He looked mournfully at the double doors. “It won’t shut properly; the right door’s swollen with water and it sticks out.”

Bugger. “Damn it. All right.” I moved over to him, fondly smoothing the folds of his hat. “Rain, if you hear something happening in here — not right, me screaming maybe, possibly gore running under the doors and my intestines hitting the wall — you run grab your father and *don’t look back*.”

Run, grab your father. He was their father. He was the only father they would ever have. Odd to think about. He squinted, screwing up his eyes; then, at last, he nodded. “Yes, Eiko.”

“I *mean* that, now.” I patted him on the shoulder. “Go scat. What’s for lunch?”

“Pie,” he answered happily, “a big meat pie.”

I would leave him to his big meat pies and his cleaning and his polish, and his brothers and his father. “I love you, Rain.”

“I love you, Eiko.” He toddled out, big feet careful not to trip on the cracked marble tiles of the ballroom. He shut the doors behind him, faltering on the one that was swollen, pushing it until it was at least wedged against the other.

Right.

No more mercy.

I strode to the middle of the room. It was big and spacious and airy, with large glass windows with the curtains pulled aside to let in the hot sunlight. It would do beautifully. There was a warm wind blowing in from some crack, stirring my clothes. The cotton against my skin was soft as clouds; Kuja had beautiful taste in materials.

“Phoenix,” I said aloud, raising my wand. “Fenrir. Carbunkle. Madeen.”

My wand dragged by my side as I started pacing a slow, measured circle, dropping its sacred flowerdust on the ground; one syllable for each step. “Madeen. Carbunkle. Fenrir. Phoenix.”

There was soon shining dust where I walked; my fingers twitched as I acknowledged the directions, tilting my head at every degree. Three-sixty; two-seventy; ninety; north, south, east, west.

Concentrate, girl, concentrate; you're on the battlefield with Garnet. You're both Summoning; she gives you that little smile she always does, the one that's far away with other planets, and you feel the power coming off her like a powerfan. She's beautiful, she's your soulsister; remember that feeling, how she made you feel like all your magic was a white-hot nova and you exploded harder than ever. You don't have a piece of pumice at your neck; you don't need it. "Phoenix. Fenrir. Carbunkle. Madeen."

Rhythm and heartbeats. I spun around, widdershins, going the other way, quickening my step. "Madeen. Carbunkle, Fenrir, Phoenix —"

Quicker, now. Louder. "Phoenix. Fenrir. Carbunkle. Madeen!"

Swaying in place, wand not earthed any more; it didn't need it. It was belching white glitterpuffs like a kettle pouring tea, a jug with water. It sparkled in the desert sunlight, electrified.

"Madeen!"

*madeenmotherfatherterrafirmaterrahomingmade
enmaduinmaduinmadeen*

"Carbunkle!"

*carbunklecarbunklerubiesemeraldmoonstonedia
mondlightburningcarbunkle*

“Fenrir!”

*fenrirragnirhungerwolfdevouringeathragedecay
windchimeseatingthemoonfafnirfenrir*

“Phoenix!”

*phoenixlifebirdangelfeathersnewbreathfeenixpho
enix*

Louder, now.

“PHOENIX!”

*steiner’s dying, dying — garnet can hardly hold
her breath for it; there’s bloodrust on his armor, and
he can’t even bellow anymore so give him fire*

“FENRIR!”

*you always hated earthquakes; they came too
often and too hard in madain sari, levelling the
earth and giving it teeth: now the teeth are yours, in
a wolf’s mouth*

“CARBUNKLE!”

*rubylight; sometimes you are afraid, when the
fire engulfs you and there’s only the eidolon’s light*

*on your skin but you can't trust it when you're tired
and cold and it's coming right for you. you would
have wet yourself, big girl of six that you were, had
there been liquid left in you*

“MADEEN!”

*there's a girl with long green hair who can't see
for shaking and weeping; there's something shifting
and purple and white about her, and you remember
(though you had never known it): mog was never
just your father*

They were not coming.

“MADEEN!”

I had attributed the silence in my heart to absence of the Eidolons; now I felt something far sinister, the muteness of mouths that would not open. My heart filled with rage; I fell to my knees, slamming the butt of the wand down on the ground, stirring up the fine particles that swirled all around me.

“MADEEN!”

They were not coming.

I would never do it; I had failed Gaia. Black Tango would stand upon a mountaintop and destroy everything and anything as he laughed and laughed

and wept, and Necron would come and he'd destroy himself. Not even Vivi could stand against Death, not by himself, not with *me* by his side. I would never do it.

They were not coming.

So I threw a tantrum.

“Where *are you!*” I hollered, I screamed, dropping the wand and falling to the floor as my hands and feet beat the ground. I saw red, red, red. “Where *are you, motherfuckers*, I’m *CALLING YOU!* You’re meant to *COME!* Didn’t do anything wrong, I didn’t didn’t didn’t, so come to me, come to me *now*, hate you *all*, hate you *all*, grandpamakethemcome, come come come —” I was choked up in sobs, angry ones, hardly able to speak, emphasising my words with punches to the tiles until my knuckles felt bruised. My chest heaved against the ground. “I’m *yours*, you’re mine, mine *mine mine*, get here *now*, don’t understand, need you, need you more’n ever, bitches, bastards, stupid, stupid —” My voice rose in a wail. “Didn’t mean to, didn’t mean it — why’d you leave me, want my mother: want my father, want Daddy — want, here, want *Madeen* —”

Eiko.

The voice was commanding; it rebounded around the ballroom, up to the dim crystal of a chandelier as I stared up in tearstreaked wonder.

Eiko, we will not come.

“Madeen?” I breathed. ‘Madeen — please,’ I started crying again, out of desperation. My nose was bright red by now, my face swollen; not exactly a picture of Summoning dignity. “Madeen, I *need* you.”

We will not come.

And Carbunkle: *We will not do it.*

With Fenrir: *It is abomination.*

Then Phoenix: *We are in agreement; we will not come, we will not do this thing.*

“But —” My mouth was dry; I desperately needed water. “But I need to, I need to stop him. It’s Vivi; and the Black Mages, they’ve never done anything wrong, nothing but wanting to live —”

We do it out of love for you, Eiko. My motherfather. Let dead things die. To continue down the path you are taking is doom —

Destruction. Fenrir.

Apocalypse. Carbunkle.

Death. Phoenix.

“I faced Necron before.” I gritted my teeth together, a bad habit. (‘You’ll have grooved teeth like a seamstress,’ Mama would always say.) “If my life is forfeit, then so be it. I don’t care any more. I never shall again.”

The one you name Necron is bound in chains, Fenrir said. His voice was a low, grinding growl, like a howling tornado. *To do this thing you would loose his chains.*

Chains bind him for a reason, little Carbunkle chimed in. I’d always wanted to reach out and stroke Carbunkle, touch the adorable little jewelbright beauty. *He would devour everything that had ever existed, once freed from those bonds. Do not trust the mage; he cannot do this thing, and neither can you.*

We will not see you devoured, Eiko. Madeen again. Eiko. Eiko. Do you not see the danger? Were I Bahamut or Ashura, I still would not let you do this thing.

“You can’t hold out forever,” I whispered. “I know you’re there now.”

You would force us? Phoenix. You would break us open? We are your brothers and sisters in bondage; the door to the spiritworld is not open to you without us.

“You don’t *understand!*” I could have thrown another tantrum, there and then. “Tango’s — Vivi’s — he’s going to die, don’t you see, and so’s Rain, and so’s Sunny, and the rest — they’ll Stop just like Tide. I can’t let any more go. I can’t. I have to try; please, please, I have to try. Oh, Gods, I have to try or I won’t be able to live my life.”

This way lies madness, Eiko.

“I’m half-damned crazy *already*, Madeen.”

She loves it. That was Carbunkle, accusing. She loves It; see, she’s crazy from it. She said so herself.

*How could anyone love **that**? Fenrir. She does not. She is terrified and upset and easily lead. She loves the children; she loves him not.*

“I would prefer it if you *stopped* talking about me as if I wasn’t *here!*”

They immediately quietened.

Madeen’s voice. Kinder. Sensed my tiredness, my despair. *What do you want, Eiko?*

“You know what?” I said mechanically. “I’d like a hot bath where I can’t hear antlions screaming, or mating, or eating, or whatever it is antlions yell about. I’d like to hear an airship. I’d like my own bed. I want my mother and my father and Zidane and Garnet and Elia and the others. I want *that*.”

There was a pause, as if left for whispering.

That, Eiko, we will gladly grant. Do you wish to go home?

Did I want to go home?

Did I want to leave the Black Mages behind, and their lonely little graveyard, to a father who killed them with his bare hands? Without what little protection I could give them? To Black Tango, mad and wild with loneliness and grief, a little boy I’d once loved with all my heart and fought and bled for? Did I really want to leave that?

“Yes,” I said.

Then there was Phoenix, rearing up in front of me, filling the chamber with light and warmth and dazzle as the two great wings of light were beaten. It choked up the dust around me; I stuffed my wand in my trousers again, clambering and slipping desperately up until I was safely on its back.

Phoenix did not care about doors; we broke up out of the roof, me clinging to my Eidolon's feathers as we shot hundreds of miles into the air. The last thing I saw was a small, ragged, scarecrow figure, wings tucked into his back as he watched us from the top of one of the Desert Palace's towers; then Phoenix took off, as fast as the wind, and took me to Alexandria.

Home. Away from this place. I was free.

And all I could think of was: *I've left behind my glasses.*

11. You Can't Go Home Again

A/N: This one goes out to Gabi, Tobu Ishi and Aishiteru for turning my witterings into some of the most spectacular visual art I have ever clapped eyes on. Thank you for the bribes, the warmth, and the unending support.

Go Not Gently

Chapter Ten - You Can't Go Home Again

I never remember much of what happens next.

Apparently flames licked at my bare feet as, flaring, Phoenix drops me limp on the roof of the palace of Alexandria. I am delirious; I am too tired to hold to anything, I do not know where I am, I do not know why I am. I have been flying for hours, the tears in my eyes burnt away before I can cry them.

Apparently they were shouting for the Queen the moment I crumpled down; they can hardly touch me, the guards on watch, my skin so hot it blisters the leather of their gloves as I roll on the cool tiles in agony. The only one to touch me is Garnet, and I burn her, and I leave ash on the pure ivory of her evening-robe as I fumble for her cheeks with smoke still rising from my hands.

And all I can do is mumble, and Garnet told me later that it chilled her more than anything to hear my words:

He's coming, he's coming, he's coming. I can't stop him.

I woke up with a start quite early in the morning — before the sun rose, when the sleeping weed wore off. I think it was the bed that did it; soft down sheets and pillows that smelt like lavender-water and constant washing, silk embroidered coverlet smudged with the grey dirt of my fingertips and mattress deep and soft.

Clean, sweet. It didn't matter that my head was pounding and my throat felt like it was made out of volcanic rock. I *wallowed*.

“Aunt Eiko?”

I sat up and rubbed at my sleepy, puffy eyes with one wrist, staring at the apparition in the middle of the candlelit room. My psuedo-niece was there, short sword safe in one hand, lacy blue nightshirt tucked into a pair of breeches as she looked at me keenly. She tucked the sword into the scabbard-belt at her waist with a steel shiver, moving into a position of standing rest that I had often seen Beatrix assume.

“I’m standing princess-guard,” Cornelia til Alexandros told me, solemn as a little owl. ‘I’m keeping you safe from the Lindblum Strangler. When he comes in here I’ll do *this* — “she drew the sword, fluid, whirling around in an arc so that the blade sang through the air. Her long dark hair was still in sleeping-braids, tail wiggling behind her in anticipation as she gripped her sword in both hands, shadows dancing in the candlelight.” An’ I’ll chop him up *here*, from his gizzard to his gullet, and then we can go have breakfast.’ Having finished disemboweling her invisible enemy on the rug, she slid the sword back in its sheath, turning around to look at me. “Oh, Aunt Eiko, why are you crying? Aren’t you happy to be home?”

I suddenly had my arms full of little princess as I pressed my face into her shoulder, toes in the thick carpeting at my feet as I pulled my legs off the bed. Our horns sawed together momentarily, hers so much shorter and blunter, me grasping for her eight-year-old long limbs as I clutched to make sure she was really real.

“I thought I’d never see you again,” I gasped, rough and low-voiced. “I thought you were dead. I’m so sorry, Elia. I’m so sorry. I thought he killed you, but he told me he hadn’t, but — oh, *Cornelia*.”

“He didn’t either,” she said, bravely, loyally, so like her father in her mannerisms it made me want to laugh through my thick veil of tears. ‘He came into my room one night, and I screamed and screamed and I *would’ve* killed him dead with my sword but he was all clawing at me. Then Steiner burst in and he dropped me, and he shot fire at Steiner and there’s *still* big scorch-marks all over my room, and then he jumped out my window and flew away. All that,’ she said indignantly, “just to pinch my necklace!”

I did laugh, then, throat a dry crackle. *He never wanted your necklace.* “We’ll get it back for you, Elia.”

“We have you back,” she said, big blue eyes honest. “Isn’t that the best present?”

“I’m not back five minutes and already you’re priming me for sweets. You’ll rot your teeth before you’re nine.”

“Aunt Ei-ko!” She moved back, scabbard swinging. “I’m already nine, anyway.”

I stood up, looking desperately for a robe; my clothes were all in fragments. Cornelia helpfully handed me one, hanging over the back of a chair, helping me in as my arms moved numb and slow. Damn sleeping weed. My head felt like my brains were stuffed with grease. How much time had passed? “I missed your birthday.”

“Yeah.” She tied it at the waist, neat and quick with her fingers as ever. “But, guess this, Uncle *Amarant* came and he gave me —”

I remembered *my* ninth birthday, with Amarant. “Some antifreeze, a potion and a doll’s tea-set?”

“Close,” she said practically, with the air of someone who had also grown up with ‘Uncle’ Amarant’s presents. “Two potions, a bag of liquorice strips, and this wicked-cool bomb thing that Mother

took off me but Father says we can go and detonate it down at the lake when the weather's cooler."

I was home. I suddenly got that sense, standing in the midst of one of the suites in Alexandria, the familiar smell of polish and the wind that came off the lake. The smell of the faintly lemony beeswax candles, fragrant, unlike the tallowy tapered stubs made with rosepetals that Kuja had obviously favoured. A powerful wave swept over me; deep, unbidden regret.

"Shouldn't you be in bed, Elia?"

"Mother and Father let me watch you." She looked inordinately pleased at the prospect. "While they were making arrangements and things — telling Great-Aunt Hilda and Great-Uncle Cid, and they're coming over now, and Mother was also fit to burst over wanting to call Freya'n the others — don't know why, since there's Beatrix and Steiner and me, and once Strangler's here — pow, slash, let me at 'em!"

"And *what* were you supposed to do the moment Aunt Eiko woke up?"

Cornelia looked crestfallen at the heartbreakingly familiar voice in the doorway; my knees shook at

how much it had become stranger to me. “I’m sorry, Papa.”

I couldn’t help myself. I ran to him. I clung to Zidane Tribal — Zidane til Alexandros, Prince Consort Zidane, deathslayer Zidane, hero Zidane — and wept my third round of tears that night into him. I was well-versed in weeping, now, shaking and sobbing hysterically into his chest as he carried me as if I was still six. Cornelia stood stock-still by the doorway as he cradled me, calm and fierce, arms wrapped around me in tight embrace with the inherent promise of protection.

“Shush-a-shush,” he murmured. “Ow — don’t move your head that way, you’re gonna poke my eye out with that damn thing. I’m here, Eiko. Don’t worry, now. You’re safe with us. No more. You’ve had a long while of it.”

“*Shit*,” I sobbed. “No, no, don’t — don’t let me cry — can’t ’ford it, Zidane. He’s *coming*.”

“Where’d the bastards hide you, Eiko?” He gripped my shoulders, looking into my face, golden hair falling and feathered over his forehead. “We almost gave you up for dead ’till the bastard came to try to do in Elia, we scoured half the world looking again, pulled it damn near apart —”

“We were in the desert, that doesn’t matter —”

“Who is he?” The blue eyes were intense. “Steiner said it was a Black Waltz, true as he’d ever seen it —”

“Zidane.” I stopped him, our babble, trying to take a breath on the situation. “How are my parents? Are they...” *Are they alive, Zidane?*

He softened. “Cid and Hilda? They’re alive and well and kicking.” *Thank the Gods. Thank you, Madeen. Thank you for answering my prayers.* “Course, Cid had his arm broken when Lindblum was attacked, but he’s fine otherwise. But...”

I pulled myself tight. One broken arm. “I want to know *everything*.”

Zidane bit his lip, then looked back at me, calloused hand slipping into mine. He obviously hadn’t changed for bed, or made it to bed; he looked tired and harried and suddenly — old. I remembered Vivi’s words, and they bit. *Zidane is too old and soft to be Gaia’s hero any more.* “Artania — Artania died in the attack. We lost too many good people that day. I’m sorry.”

I stared, unblinking, into the empty space above his shoulder. Heavy with our grief, he rubbed the

back of my hand, standing up and pacing back and forth in a familiar action as his tail swished like a cat's. "We'll kill him, Eiko," he said lowly, in a cold hard tone that I had seldom heard from the ex-thief. I suddenly remembered the chill underground tunnels of Bran Bal. "We'll get him for everything he's done."

It was on my lips; *It's Vivi, Zidane, can't you see? Why couldn't I see? Why didn't we know?* but it died stillborn. I opened my mouth and shut it again.

"He's coming," I murmured, my voice queer and high in the night. "He was already coming six hours ago."

"Shi — *sugar.*" The epithet sputtered out as Zidane gave wry eye to his daughter. "Damn. Garnet'll need to know. You feeling well enough to come along? She's called in the cavalry and all the fine horses and all the fine men, and last time I heard even Quina was sharpening all the forks in the kitchen and asking if this guy was good to eat. We set up war-room in Dagger's firsthall and we could *really* use you right now. How many is he gonna bring?"

I almost laughed, shaking my head back and forth, an unhappy smile on my face that was

somewhere near pride and somewhere near pain.
“There’s only ever him, Zidane. Nobody else.”

It was his turn to open his mouth, then close it again, like a fish. “Goddamn,” he hissed slowly. “You sit *right here*, okay? Cornelia, you go off to bed —”

“Papa!”

“— or on second thought, you stay right where you are, too, sweetness.” He jogged wearily off into the doorway again, and then doubled back almost instantly.

“Eiko?”

“Yes?”

He smiled, tender. I would always be a little girl to him; I was glad I was that little girl. Zidane would always love me. “I’m glad you’re back.”

Then he went, barking orders to the guards, voice disappearing down the stone corridors. “I want double you guys outside here! Get the Pluto Knights on it, okay? And someone get me Beatrix!”

I sat down on my bed, wanting a hot bath and a hot meal and to go back to sleep and in the morning,

some bewitchment would mean that everything was all over. Minister Artania. Vivi had killed Arty.

Cornelia sat down beside me, her hands fluttering down in her lap like butterflies until one hand gripped the safety of the black worked scabbard by her side. There was silence between us; I was far away.

“What’s his name?”

She brought me back down to Gaia, and I blinked. “Who?”

“The man. Who strangled me.” She wouldn’t meet my eyes. “He said I was... the prettiest little girl he’d ever seen. I think he was sort of... Sad. But then he started strangling me. I think he’s crazy.”

“His name is Black Tango.”

She thought about it a while. “That’s a silly name.”

This time, I smiled. “He knows, my little love. He knows.”

Five months, two weeks, three days. He had stolen over half a year of my life. Weeks had bled into months. Half a year. No wonder they gave me up for dead.

Half a year. It had felt like three weeks; three months at most. Half a bloody year.

And all of it gone in a few hours. It was four in the morning; I ran to a hot bath and allowed myself twenty minutes of pretending that I was back in the Desert Palace with Rain's patiently folded drycloths on the cool marble. The fuzzy, fluffy towels broke that particular spell; I dressed myself without any particular care to how I looked.

My blossom-wand was on the table, where some kind soul had left it, gently puffing little breaths of sparkling powder into the air as it happily sat and soaked up the moisture of Alexandrian air. I took it and tucked it into my petticoat, with nobody seeing, and I gripped Cornelia's arm as I teetered up the cool stairs of Garnet's halls.

Every soldier saluted me as I passed, which was odd, because I was the thing farthest from a hero that night.

Or morning. The sun was rising as I was finally seated in Garnet's firsthall; before I was seated next to Garnet, who held my hand, who was almost too beautiful to behold. I tried desperately to hold on to the things that happened then; the Queen's soft, pretty welcome-home, the refusal of everyone to lead my side, the protection and the warmth and the love.

It was only Garnet and Zidane and Beatrix in the firsthall; and a handful of soldiers, and stubborn Cornelia dozing in the hard seat beside me as I sat down. Everybody seemed to be preparing for all-out war; I nervously poked at the porridge that somebody had brought for my breakfast. *Rain keeps it hotter.*

"All right, Princess." Princess Eiko once more; Beatrix sat down opposite me, looking as if she'd rather be standing. "Your mother and father have been grounded."

My heart raced, porridge immediately ash in my mouth. Artania's death had still not sunk in; nothing was sinking in. Everything was just a parade of worried faces, of tiny short-lived joys. My arrival home was relief for everyone — I wasn't dead, that was a nice first step — but I had left a trail for the

wolf coming home. “What? Why? Are they all right?”

“Sentries spotted something flying near the transport,” she said crisply. “They’re not risking the Regent; they landed and they’re proceeding on-ground for a while. They’re fine. *You* are not. We need to know everything about this man, now.”

How many people had died at Lindblum? It must have been some kind of massacre. Of course it would have been some kind of massacre; I was a fool for thinking otherwise. Not for the first time, there was a lump in my throat when I thought about the deaths on the head of Tango. Vivi. Tango.

“Do we really need this?” Garnet’s voice, low and velvety. “Eiko has barely collapsed on our doorstep and already we’re submitting her to, to — interrogation.”

“It’s fine.” I stepped in before Zidane could open his mouth and instigate a matrimonial blow-up. “I’m... I’m all right. There can be time for letting me sleep later.”

Beatrix nodded in approval at this sentiment. She was still ice-cool and noble and impeccably lovely; the girlish chestnut hair that had once hung down in

glossy waves had been severely braided back, pinned up to the back of her head, only a little bit of premature frost touching the temples. The cloth of her eyepatch had been wrapped around her head so tightly I thought it might break with every shift of facial expression. “He is a Black Mage?”

Obviously. “Yes.”

“A Black Waltz, Eiko,” Zidane supplied, and I almost laughed; of course I knew that. “Isn’t he?”

“Yes.” Helpless at my one-word answers, I cleared my throat. “I think so. He’s... He’s sentient, Zidane, he’s no monster. He...” I drew the coffee up to my mouth, savouring the Burman grounds before I sipped deeply. “He talks. He knows what he is doing. He...” *He’s the little mage who slept beside me all those years ago, you fools, all of us fools. I used to watch him skip with a rope for hours, little girls calling out the numbers, big feet surprisingly deft with the rhythm. This is our murderer.* “He’s got a plan,” I finished lamely.

Garnet’s hand was suddenly squeezing mine, so tightly I knew her knuckles would be white. “What plan, Eiko? *What* plan?”

“He’s got some little Black Mages,” I mumbled, into my mug, feeling perilously close to tears. “He wants to wipe out all the other races so there’s a home for them.”

“He can’t.” Beatrix’s smooth, smoky voice was thrown off momentarily by her confusion. “He can’t possibly be that powerful.”

Bet you a gil? “He *is* that powerful.”

“He’s got the ability to teleport, hasn’t he?” Zidane pressed both his hands down on the table, blue eyes desperate for anything as he looked at me calmly eating my porridge. “Why’s he taking so damn long, then?”

“He’s looking for me. He doesn’t know where I am.”

“Why does he want you, Eiko?” Beatrix again, quizzical. “I cannot fathom why. What do you offer him?”

Some days I wonder that myself, Beatrix.

The faint rays of the early morning sun shone through the window facing the table; I stared at the glass panes, sipping my coffee, voice dull. “I don’t know.”

There was a long silence. Zidane sat down on the table, without recrimination from his wife or Beatrix or me, staring down at his hands; there was a dreadful haunted look on his face. “Little Black Mages,” he mumbled. “Real little Black Mages?”

“They’re so beautiful.” My voice caught.

Garnet was looking at me, and I could see her out of the corner of one eye. My hand trembled with the coffee; I buried my mouth in it, anything to steady myself from the expression on her face. She could see inside of me like I was as transparent as the window, and I was surprised that she couldn’t see the truth of the matter written all over my face in black ink.

How could you, Vivi? How could you? Oh, Gods, Artania, Arty, all those people, oh, Lindblum. It’s all you deserve if you die here, come into the rat-trap, get your head snapped o — don’t die, please, not just yet. Not just yet. Please. Our purpose is not finished.

“What aren’t you telling us, Eiko?” her gentle voice was more killing than anybody else’s in the room. I could hear the faint march of guards outside; there was a bellow, Steiner, organizing them into lines. “What’s wrong?”

I dropped the mug, then. It fell on the table, spilling the last dregs of its contents on the polished wood; I rose, rubbing at it with a napkin, face bright red as I mopped up the puddle and muttered apology. Nobody was listening to it; Zidane and Beatrix's eyes were fastened on me like buttons, unforgiving.

"You don't *understand*," I suddenly burst out, causing the Queen to start, staring in misery down at my food with unseeing eyes. "You don't, you don't — oh, shit, we all fucked up so badly, we've made our bed, we have to *lie in it*. It's our fault, you know, this is all our damn fault!"

"What are you talking about?" Garnet rose to her feet, hands gripping my shoulders, surprisingly strong. Her porcelain face was tight and drawn, more grey china than cream, a blur as I shook my head over and over again. Zidane was behind me, hands on my arms as I tried to push Garnet away, holding me fast as Cornelia roused herself up out of her sleep.

"Eiko, snap out of it," he hissed. I heard their voices as if from underwater, bubbly, thick and murky and rattling around in my head like pieces of

lost metal. “Eiko, it’ll all be oka — Dagger, you don’t think she’s under some kind of spell, do you?”

“None that I can detect — Eiko, *please* —”

The clanging of bells roused me from my stupor, and Zidane and Garnet’s hands stilled on my shoulders. With a bark from Beatrix, the soldiers standing at ready fled the room, slamming doors as they went.

It was only then that I broke away from myself, hating myself for behaving as if I was sixteen. I was an engineer. I’d never known what to say with my mouth.

“That’s sure as hell not Freya,” Zidane snapped. An explosion suddenly rattled the cups on the table; my blood went cold, and I broke away from them to press my cheek against the cool stones of the wall.

I knew it couldn’t last.

I don’t know if I wanted it to.

Shouts, now, and screams. Cornelia had awoken and her sword was in her hand, immediately flanking her mother; her father looked at her with dread. “Beatrix, take Cornelia and Garnet somewhere safe,” he immediately demanded.

“Like hell,” Garnet spat. “Beatrix, please take Cornelia somewhere safe.”

“With all due respect, your majesty, I think the safest thing is to stay here,” she said coolly. She had unearthed her wicked greatsword from the sheath constantly on her hip, *Save The Queen*, and whipped the tablecloth off the table with a clash. “I think it would, perhaps, also be wise to barricade.”

“Like *that’ll* stop him,” I snapped, pulling my wand out of my blouse with a flourish. “He’ll blow the castle to pieces and he’s busily *killing* all your guards!”

I could see Steiner almost flash through her head; her lips tightened, resolve in her face, glacial determination. Her husband was out there with — with Vivi, oh, Gods, Vivi, Vivi wouldn’t kill *Steiner*, would he — with a murderer, with a destroyer of cities, and she was inside playing bodyguard.

“If you have any suggestions as to where he is weakest, I pray you give them now,” she said icily.

Zidane had opened the cabinet to the side; he pulled out two daggers, stuffing them in his belt before throwing a rod to Garnet. She deftly caught it, businesslike.

“You can’t.” My voice rose on a hysterical note. “You can’t. He’ll kill you. Please, Zidane, he *wants* to kill you!”

“He can get in line, then, can’t he?” He checked over the daggers. “Damn, but why did I donate Orichalon to that museum? Garnet, sweetheart, get Cornelia to hide under the table.”

“I am *not* hiding under the table!”

“Zidane —”

He whirled to look at me, thoughtful. “You’re not the same girl, Eiko,” he murmured. “You’ve come back different and, hell, I don’t blame you, and I don’t know what happened, but we don’t have *time* and we’re not gonna give you up again.”

One of the doors splintered open; Zidane had jumped on top of the table, daggers ready, before I could even stumble back. A large green hand, claw-armoured, pulled away the rubble. This allowed a dainty crimson-clad Burmecian warrior access, doffing her helmet as her enormous redheaded partner pushed through after her.

“Dreadfully sorry I’m late,” Freya Crescent said sardonically, and my hands shook on my wand. *Are*

you outmatched, now, Vivi? “Amarant wanted us to stop and eat.”

“Ha fuckin’ ha.” He looked at the wreckage of the door. “Zidane, you do know your guards’re being slaughtered like goddamn flies up there? What are you doin’ in *here*? Hey —” Amarant’s face cleared, eyes focusing on me, stretching up to his full lumbering height. “Brat. You really didn’t cark it.”

“You can tell her how much you missed her later, Amarant.” Garnet’s eyes were on me, begging. *Let there be a later, Eiko*, they said. *Please let there be a later.* “How on earth did you get here so quickly?”

He just grunted; Freya grinned and walked over to the table, him trailing behind her. She looked cool as a cucumber, and the hands on her Dragon Hair were ready for death. “Thankfully, we were in the same area as each other when the message came out, and we slogged for hours — not the most entertaining jaunt, though all right, it’s amusing in retrospect. After we kill this little upstart bastard, I’ll tell you the details.”

I noticed the way they were moving; Cornelia was by my side as they all ringed me, pressing close, almost in formation as they faced the doorways.

There were more screams, now. “Why am I in the middle?”

“Because he’s trying to get at *you*, Eiko,” Zidane said dryly, having hopped down from the table and backing me almost into it. “Because, honeychile, you’re the one he wants.”

I was the anti sacrificial-victim. The table pressed into my hip.

“Where’s he going to come from, Zidane?” Freya’s voice could almost match Beatrix for sheer crispness.

“Right door.” He nodded his head. “Closest to the stairwell.”

“You’re all fuckin’ idiots, you know,” Amarant grunted, looking over his shoulder furtively, shoulder to shoulder with the dragoon as Cornelia goggled in bliss at the lack of a censor board. I was already turned around, facing the other way, both hands gripping my wand as if that would maximise its power. I knew; he knew I knew.

Garnet, still wrapped in her morning robe. “Why’s that?”

“Because the bitch can *fly*!”

Sunrise streamed through the window, and Black Tango with it as it exploded in thousands of golden fragments. My niece screamed.

I have seen frightening things. I have seen Necron. I have seen Kuja, I have seen Kuja in full majesty and anger and glory as he laid utter waste to a planet. I have fought hideous monsters. I once saw a hapless man sucked into an airship engine, turned into a fine tapestry of flesh and bone and guts. I've been down in the darkness of the earth since I was six.

Those things all paled in comparison to a Black Mage, a fully-grown Black Mage Tranced with every feather of his outstretched wings glowing technicolour pulling himself to full height on the other end of the long table. There was not just one pair; there were three, framing him with feathers, almost hurting my eyes as I took him in. Vivi practically crackled and snapped with anger and power, smelling of blood and flames and black leather blowing gently in the wind of his own magic as he glared.

His crescent-thin eyes were not golden. They were red.

I clambered up on the table before anyone could stop me, facing him. The fine cotton of my dress blew in the draft, me almost choking from the heat of him, palms slick against my wand as all I could do was stare, stupidly.

“Come to me now, linden-bloom.” His voice was soft, coaxing, as if there was nobody in the room but him and me. “Come to me now and no more people die.”

“You killed Arty.” I found my feet, curling my toes into the table. “You killed Artania.”

“Why should that matter? I’ve killed thousands, Carol. One soul among the many makes me fouller to you?”

“This ends now.” Zidane, up on the table between us, daggers in his long thin hands as his body fluidly moved into a defensive position. “You almost killed my daughter, you son of a bitch, you killed tens of thousands in Lindblum, you’re gonna kill Eiko if you keep this u —”

The Black Mage stretched out his hand; it was Garnet who screamed this time as Zidane was struck with white-hot lightning, body seizing in agonyspasm as he was struck once, twice.

Doublemagic, Vivi's specialty, yes'm, and now making Zidane's eyeballs smoke in his skull as he collapsed in a smoking heap down on the table.

"Too theatrical, Tribal," Tango hissed, eyes no longer concealing his dreadful hunger. "I have been thirsting to do that for *years*."

Freya leapt. Vivi swept his hands out; I hit the table and clung to it as everybody was blown backward, smacking heavily into the wall. Amarant caught Cornelia before she was blown through the smashed-open doorway, pulling her painfully against him as they too collapsed to the ground.

"Don't move." His voice was silky. "I don't like it when you move."

He plucked the daggers from Zidane's twitching hands, throwing them away out the window. Fried and choking, the Prince Consort of Alexandria rose to his feet again, swaying as he stepped away from Black Tango to sway gently as he moved back into position. The winged mage didn't bother with spells this time; he hit Zidane across the mouth with his wizarding staff, snapping back his head.

Zidane spat a mouthful of blood; it rained crimson at the Mage's feet. "*Who are you!*"

“Who *am* I?” Tango hollered back. Another slash with his staff; Zidane blocked it, wiry arms smacking it away with all the force he could muster. “Who am I, Tribal, who am I, that is the question I ask myself, alone in the night I ask: ‘Who am I? Perhaps Zidane will know — Perhaps Zidane will know who I am!’ What is the meaning, Zidane? What is the meaning of my existence? Do I even exist? *I don’t exist to you, Zidane!*”

“Who the hell are you?” Zidane asked, low, his tail thrashing. I knew he was angry. “I’ve never met you!”

“You *left* me!” Vivi hollered, screaming, voice cracking like glass and so loud I thought my ears were going to pop. He ripped off his hat; the locks of hair that spilled out floated out to halo around his head were as red as his eyes, red like blood, red like hate, red like fire. Trance. “You left me to die and you ripped out my heart and you left me to die, you left me to die, *they dieddieddied* because of you all gone always you imperfect, imperfect, imperfect, I require a new angel of death —”

I did not blame Zidane for falling to his knees. I did not blame him for grasping the rim of Vivi’s cloak, and for looking up at him, with my first

thought that I had ever had on his lips; it was said with such weeping grief that my heart broke, again, again and again. “Brother —”

I knew better Vivi’s reactions than Zidane would. My hands raised slightly quicker than my maddened mage’s, spells hissed from my lips quicker than his fingers could expel death. Zidane exploded in fire only a second after I drowned him in a reflection-spell. Reflection; protection; Shell. Only a second, but it was enough.

Zidane rose unhurt; Vivi slammed his staff into his side, knocking him off the table, his eyes all on me.

“You know what he did,” he hissed, like a furious cat. “You know what he did, you know what he touched, I’ll rip the Genome’s dick off and tear out his heart with my mouth and teeth and feed it to my children, a baby bird, I’ll rip him to shreds, then you’ll know the meaning of scarecrow —”

“Vivi,” I said, through clenched teeth, “no. *No*. It’s over. They’re *dead* and it’s not Zidane’s fault, goddamn it all, Bibi and the others died because of *nobody*! You can’t bring them back by killing him! You can’t bring them *back*!”

His howl was that of an animal, and it chilled all my bones to petrified amber. My own Trance rose out of my fear like a fish in a pool, out of watching his agony, my tongue already spelling my Reflect as I raised my arms and spread my wings and was engulfed in a pillar of ice.

The shards melted and puddled around my feet as I broke out of them; both of us glowed like stars as I rushed him, bore him out the window, both of us tumbling into midair as we flapped strongly away from the firsthall. The others could not help me now.

I exploded, again and again. I felt the threefold kisses of fire and thunder and ice, all of them dripping off me like powdersnow. My whitewashed wings beat slowly in midair, unable to take my eyes off him. We were both weeping; both of us, like tired children. There were fine trceries on his scarred face, like some demonic tribal tattoo, stark against the snow of his skin. His hair looked like burning tentacles, like some Medusa. It was never meant to be a duel.

“Dead!” Firaga.

“*Deaddeaddead*, everything dead —” Thundaga.

“— all-around dead, everything surrounding —”
Blizzaga.

“Why can’t I die, Eiko? Let me die, let me die, let me die. I exist only to kill. I exist only to kill. I exist *only to kill* —”

I saw his hands raised, saw the glimmering ball of death within them. Doomsday. At his power level, at his strength and speed and suffering, he could take out the good chunk of Alexandria that lay below us. I opened my mouth in readiness to pour out Holy from my hand, my wand, my body —

An earsplitting roar stopped both of us in our tracks, and I thought that the shadow that immediately engulfed us was the end. But the spell had spluttered in Vivi’s hands.

Standing on the balcony was Garnet, robe whipping in the wind, the eidolon Kingdragon Bahamut stretched up over Alexandria Castle in eye-defying enormity. He roared again, and it shook the foundations of the city; it shook me to the core.

Vivi immediately grabbed me, both of us struggling in midair, his staff stretched over my neck as I tried to beat my wings against him. I kicked helplessly.

“*Vivi!*”

It was Garnet’s voice, anguished, loud and clear and heartbroken. “Vivi, stop this! Please! Vivi!”

Both of us spiralled down to earth, down to the deathly emptied town-square of Alexandria, the crescent-city. His Trance had burnt out like a lamp, and mine with it; when we collapsed together on the cobblestones, the hair that fell over my shoulders was white.

“They’re dead,” he sobbed, into my shoulder, staff clattering on the ground. His arms wrapped around my waist, holding on to me for dear life, desperate for an anchor. “They’re dead dead d-dead, Eiko, I couldn’t stop it, I never could stop it, I never *will!*”

“No,” I soothed, desperate. “You will. You will, I swear it. I promise. You *will.*”

His teeth bit down on my shoulder, more for staunching his pain than causing mine. I hissed, gripping down on his hands.

“Rain Stops in a matter of months,” he hissed into the bitemark. Everything within me liquefied, my soul screaming at the thought. “Your precious Rain, your precious Sunny. Same batch, my little

linden-love, same slowing-down and drawing-down. Red rain. Out goes the sun; it is dead, it is finished, it is perished. My little children, my little fresh-blown sweets.” He wailed again, high and anguished.

I wrenched myself around in his arms, gripping his scarred face. My fingernails dug into it, forming little white crescents in the flesh. “Over *my* dead body, Vivi Orunita!”

“Maybe it’ll come to that. Maybe, maybe.” He pressed his forehead to mine, a broken toy now. “We exist only to kill. Why do I need you so much, Eiko Carol? Why did I come for you? When have I ever needed you so much? You and your hair and the way your spine fits in your back, lindenbloom, my Eiko-fool, my meadowsweet and broom, my blood and bile and bone —”

“I’ll go back with you.” *I have needed you since I was six years old, Vivi.* “I’ll go home and we’ll finish what we’ve started.”

I bound my own fate, there in the almost-morning on the cold cobblestones, the one I knew I had been chained in long before. I think my Eidolons wept as he kissed me.

The Portal back was swift; he was on familiar terms, no more looking, no more tracking my magical signature through the dark hills of Treno and Lindblum and Burmecia. Night fell again, because it was still night in the desert, because he took me to a room where the windows were half-boarded up and thickly curtained and it would have been night there even if it had been day.

His mouth still tasted like he drank the congealed blood of dead things. Fingers pulled off coats, shirts, all black and whispery and falling to the floor like the shucked-off-skin of a caterpillar. Belts, three of them, looped around like vines with my dress open at the neck. He hit me when I touched his skin, full on the mouth, my lip cracked with my teeth and swollen with the blood; I punched him back and scrabbled like an animal at him, at trousers and cloth and more skin stained all over with his scars. He was pitted and scratched like an old rock that the sea has never touched. He had done it all to himself. There was a knife in that room that had read his body over and over again that I would never find.

Mouth to mouth; the first kisses we had ever seen had been Garnet's and Zidane's, and we had forgotten those long ago. His mouth was gentle

where his hands were rough, pulling away cotton away from lace in the frenzied search to find my skin. Then his mouth forgot gentleness where his hands learned it, and I pawed at him. I got handfuls of feathers, and then handfuls of hair, then a handful of fur from a tail that he had hidden so long that I had no idea that it had even existed.

Then I remember tears like fire, dripping on my stomach. No words; broken noises and he spoke with his hands, and his hands were just as mad as the rest of him. The blanket smelt like mildew and sweat and the pillows were long gone but the feathermattress was soft and deep. We didn't know what we were doing; we didn't want to know what we were doing, as if we were still six and nine and doing something unutterably taboo. It was all in the dark; I could hardly see my hand in front of my face. There were ancient hard muscles in his back, from his wings, deep cuts from where he had tried to lever them out with a dagger. His mouth brushed summoner's horn, brushed collarbone, brushed the scar on my shoulder from where I had been jabbed from an engineblade when I was fifteen and oh Madeen nipple and navel and thigh to knucklebone in oppressive breathbare silence and the room was an abyss.

And then my thin unlovely legs were wound stuck around his thin unlovely hips, and I lay too exhausted to move my mouth. His hand still cupped around the curvature of a breast, mouth buried at the hollow of my shoulder as his black wings covered us both. Vivi and I. I and Vivi, bad grammatically but it still worked. Whitemage, blackmage. There was no white in that room.

His first and last words were all I heard before I succumbed to nothingness.

“And I crown thee my angel of death, linden-bloom.”

12. Straining Towards Apocalypse

Go Not Gently

Chapter Eleven - Straining Towards Apocalypse

Two small figures sit silhouetted in front of a campfire, modest and smoky, stomachs full of bread and meat and cheese as they half-doze in the guise of keeping watch. Garnet, who gives in to their pleadings to watch like the older members of the party, sits a little way away so that the fire doesn't get into her eyes and patches up an undershirt. (She is kept up merely for the fact that repairing a tear is nothing like stitching a sampler, and her reddened fingers pick out knots over and over again from the rough canvas. In the morning Zidane will take it, nimble fingers dancing with the needle until the rip is invisible in the cloth.)

The first is awoken by the feel of the little black mage's hat falling upon her hair, tilted back by gravity, startled into clarity and anxious to prove that she has not in fact been drowsing. "Issat a dragon?"

Vivi is also startled out of ash-smelling dreams, squinting and panic-stricken at the dragon that turns out to be an owl searching for supper. "... T-That's a bird, Eiko."

"... It might have been a dragon. You're not watching properly!"

"It's got feathers!"

*"**Some** dragons might have feathers," is announced in the pitying tones of the knowledgeable to the ignorant.*

"That would be b-bad," Vivi says after a while. "Then they would look like birds, not dragons."

*"They could hide in birdflocks," Eiko says thoughtfully. "Mmmm, **crunch**."*

*"**Eiko!**"*

Mog squirms in the front pocket of Eiko's coveralls, a snug bundle of fuzz and bobble and exquisitely minature wings, curled into a tight ball

against her full stomach. “You can sleep if you like,” she offers generously. “I’m watching.”

It has been a long day. Vivi flops undignifiedly into her lap, head next to Mog, close enough to hear the little motor of her heartbeat as Eiko looks down into her eyes. He smiles at her, sleepy-sweet, his golden eyes little tired crescents; he gives everything, he has always given everything, nothing exists that he would not rip off himself and offer to her in the clumsy leather rounds of his mage’s hands. “Goodnight. I love you,” he adds officiously.

*Vivi loves everyone, but Eiko looks around with red cheeks in case anybody has heard. There is only Garnet, unpicking threads, hair hiding a grin at Vivi’s words. “I love **you**,” the white mage mutters, hot-faced. “Mostly. Sorta. Yes. Go to **sleep**.”*

He’s already sleeping.

Do not ask me why I did it.

I woke up only in morning — afternoon — the sun was high in the sky and I could not recollect — with a great sterile emptiness inside me, large as the darkness at the end of all things and a yawning gulf

of *nothing* as I desperately attempted to feel. I spent ten minutes pushing, trying to despise him — trying to *love* him — and closed my eyes, exhausted once more back into that silence.

There's words they use for girls who make themselves willing lovers of their captors, and they're not nice ones. I called myself all of them until I had run out of similes, metaphors and foreign languages, and drifted in and out of consciousness listening to his breathing and the unsteady pit-a-pat of his heart.

Oh —

Call it violent. Call it angry. Call it unhealthy, call it sick, call it anything — but call it willing, because that is what it *was*. It was almost relief, in a way, thrashing about on the angry waves to finally be sucked down to lie at rest on the cool ocean floor. I had fallen without flight, but there was no longer any reason to uselessly flap my wings against it all.

Better to freeze than to burn, Eiko.

“You're back, Mother,” Rain said, and that was that.

Mother. Yes. I was Mother. Defiled by your father, sweet boyos, yes, crowned your queen in the

more violent and rotting of boiled marriage beds. They gathered around me as I appeared in the hall late that morning, still stumbling and delicate and bruised, wobbling on my two feet and nothing queenly in my ripped cotton frock.

When I had finally and fully come to consciousness, he had lit candles. It was no breakfast in bed, no roses, but he brought me light. I grabbed that lashing furred tail in the flickering orange gloaming; that thin white-haired boy-scarecrow had squawked like a bird, then laughed, both of us suddenly laughing and laughing and laughing like drunken teenagers falling down into the rotting blankets among the deep hot musty darkness and the feather-smelling blankets. We were all bodies against each other, feathers against skin and summoner's horn, tickled and tangled — Vivi's laugh had been warm and sweet and vibrant and it had stopped abruptly at my over-tired tears: born of laughter, half-there because I'd fallen without flight. He'd then withdrawn — quiet and cold and the man again instead of the boy — and left.

The candles had blown out in his wake.

“We looked and looked and looked for you,” Sunny said, anxious, brimming over with excitement

and relief. None of them had Stopped, I learnt, died from the rage Tango had gone into, died from fruitlessly searching the basements for me where things still lurked. Shiny had gotten flung against the wall by his father and hurt his arm, but that was bandaged and easily mended. All our hurts, packaged away in a tiny little box to be thought about later. We're not dead, children; we can be fixed. "We didn't mean to lose you, Mother, we're sorry —"

"She's back."

Vivi, from the rafters. He sailed down like an overcrown crow, no blackmist, resuming his proper place at my side among the sea of pointed hats. His arm looped around my waist as his wings spread out, peacock, dominant of the pack. "She is Mistress here now."

The Black Mages stamped their boots as he tilted my chin and kissed me. If my lips moved against his, it was out of their trembling.

You fucking bastard, so the cock o'the walk —

"Go about your duties," he ordered, imperious, the loving emperor. Kuja himself could not have drawn himself up with such dignity and prestige.

“Your mother and I have work to do. We shall be in the library. My son —” he gestured at Rain — “attend me. The rest of you, we will not be disturbed.”

The Black Mages murmured assent. Each touched my skirt as they drifted past, the soft whisper of cloth against cloth as their gloves brushed it.

“We have work to do.” The whisper in my ear was not of the impertinent king of the realm. It was Black Tango, sing-song. “Come now, my love. You shall look at my equations as we down down death and together we will do this thing. You’re mine now, Princess, mine mine mine.”

I turned my head away, feeling helpless, and feeling helpless made me angry. Something simmered like hate between us as if he was tinder and I was flint, sparks falling like slow rain. “You’ve got one *hell* of an ego on you, Vivi.”

“*I’m* older,” he said, strange childish half-squabble. “I get to say what’s what. Now kiss me properly, Carol, until your lips bruise.”

I did. His mouth was submissive against mine, soft and pliant like a girl’s, my horn scraping his

forehead as I deliberately sawed it close and hard and painful as my kiss. *I'm no more yours than you are mine, Tango.* Pulling away, my erstwhile lover only smiled.

“Come on,” I muttered again, too aware of Rain’s eyes as I started to limp off. His kisses felt like public shaming, exposed, stripped bare and charred. No courtship, this. “We haven’t got the time for these foolishnesses.”

I had no more limped a few steps than he had scooped me up in his arms as if I was a cripple. He carried me to the library in that cradle, with Rain padding behind us all the way.

There was nothing louder than the damning quiet of my Eidolons. The Gods themselves had turned their faces from me.

I don’t know why I did it. Don’t ask me why I did it —

His writing was like chickenscratch. Black Tango had filled books and books and books of it, little blotted diagrams with a quill of one of his own feathers dipped in the beautiful blueviolet ink Kuja

must have favoured as he calculated the rebirth of the God of Death.

I, engineer, mathematician, could only understand half of it. Whether that was due to undue genius, undue insanity or the fact that Vivi's penmanship could have been one-upped by a Trick Sparrow with its claws dipped in mud was beyond me.

"I calculated death," he told me, enthusiastic. We were in one of Kuja's old libraries; he had collected books, thousands of books, light falling heavy on the dusty old tomes as we sat at a desk piled high with them. They were choking-thick. "I measured him, linden-bloom, high to the quadrant and scope, triangulation, mapping-marking. Terra was smaller than Gaia. The destruction was less. We need not touch the core —"

Vivi's scales were heaped with death and destruction. "But *how much?*"

(He gave me a map of the world. It was almost entirely spotted out in ink.)

It's not just life, he explained, deeply excited so that the hat on his head quivered as he stuck bony leathered fingers down in the crinkled parchment. Well, it is life. (Do you not see, Carol?) The entire

world was composed of *life*. The rivers ran right through it, and Necron fed of the death of it. The burning sacrifice of this, this, *this* — (you burn the world itself, linden-bloom, wound it, offer it beating in your hands) — with *this* and it comes —

In my mind's eye, I saw Vivi through the flames, all in black as he dug a bloodied sword down into Gaia. It wrenched and screamed; green tendrils grabbed at his ankles, his wrists, dragging him *downdown* —

It was too hot. I mopped my forehead, fingers brushing against my summoner's horn. "Which is why we can't take that path, Vivi. We can't destroy that much. We can't. It's slash-and-burn tactics, with *nothing left*. Where do we go once everything is dead?"

Leather-clad fingers strummed on the wood as he pondered his calculations, feathers bristling in his chair. Suddenly I mourned the passing of him as an intellectual; a stuttering young white-haired man going through the Lindblum universities, tragically brilliant, buried in books. We might have gone through my father's university together, Vivi and I, and that particular thought brought me to my knees forevermore. "Magic," he muttered, "magic and

mathematics. The Summoning might rend the world apart, Carolthing.”

“In the case of a ‘might’ and a ‘will’, I’ll go with ‘*might*’, don’t you think?”

“Then let us do this thing together.” He looked as smug as if he had worked just to get to this answer, and I downed the urge to plant my fist in his self-satisfied face. Vivi stood, the tattered remnants of that coat washing about his ankles as he went to a dusty shelf. One of those leatherfingers traced down spines, almost in caress, something that made every toe on my feet curl in on each other in strange icereaction.

“I have books,” he said, which was painfully obvious. “Books, books, books. There were pictures. I had seen them —” He drew one out, hefting it in his hands. “Here are your Eidolons, linden-bloom. Here are your monsterparents.”

The unbelievably heavy tome landed with a crunching thud in front of me. The pages spilled open; I saw a painstaking drawing — barely the size of my two first fingers — of a bird with spread wings; the ink was all faded to dusty violets and ochres and saffrons, the writing spidery and archaic and hard to read. *Palliadoer*, I made out.

“Write your letters, Carol.” One of his gloved fingers trailed down my neck, slow with either hesitation or promise, I didn’t care which. “Pray that they reply.”

I muttered something that contained distinct overuse of *fucker*. The chair scrabbled on marble as I stood up, away from it, Rain quietly hovering around my nonexistent skirts as I held my head imperiously high. “I will research my options *alone*.”

He didn’t call out for me as I left the library with the heavy book clutched to my bruised chest, his hands already tracing through his precious equations — not even calling for Rain as the little mage padded after me with his big feet. We each stood wreathed in fog to each other, hands all curled with pain and hate and violence, losing our footing every moment as we indecisively changed our minds to fumble to each other or oblivion.

The honeymoon was over. Funny, it hadn’t ever begun.

“This one’s got a funny name,” Rain announced, patiently scribbling down all the names I told him to

as I lay on the other side of the polished ballroom floor. A mouldering cushion was beneath my hips as I flopped flat; one of them was beginning to ache terribly as if it had been wrenched, and I was loath to cure and lock a possibly twisted muscle in position. The only thing that could touch my parched lips and not make my stomach churn was water; I gagged on milk.

“What is it, my love?”

“Quet — zakoaty — I can’t say it. It looks like a smooth bird with no feathers or eyes. *He governes oer lighteneng* — Do I write him down?”

“I don’t think so.” My wand was lying in a puddle of sunshine, soaking up the light. “All these wretched lightning kings! Read to me how many Eidolons the book said ruled Holy, my sweet — they also call it diamond-drop, or pearl...”

Rain cleared his little throat, featherscratch pausing. “Alexander Ayerith Ragyniork Etain Unicron... Um —”

“Keep on looking.” A headache had started to form. The light hurt my eyes so that I couldn’t put on my glasses without wanting to be ill, and with their closing all I could see was a dim face with eyes

that flashed violet and hands that bruised my hair with their tuggings. I was exhausted; terrified of what I was going to do, terrified of what I had done. If I walked with a heavy step into the dark and murky world of summons, mind moving beyond the lights of my eidolons and past the shadowy veil that covered the tunnel into nothing, I could fall back with my face rearranged to be on both elbows and my flesh and skin spread out to smear against every square inch of the ballroom. I was an engineer; I had to quantify this, boil it down to steps and numbers. Walk through, reach your hands out, fingers to thumbs then call their name and wait for equation... “Don’t even *open* that horrible chapter about Odin and Gilgallahwhatever, it makes my brains hurt.”

“Oh, Mother,” Rain said worriedly. “Can’t I get you some tea? Does it hurt very bad? Should we stop? Do you mind it when I call you ‘Mother’?”

“No, Rain,” I said slowly. ‘I don’t.’ *I should, I should, I should. I’m in so deep.* “I’ll be fine. Keep on reading, ducky.”

“Are you *really* going to Summon all these?”

I closed my eyes. My hips ached again. I had been calling to my Eidolons all morning like a lost soul; *Fenrir, Fenrir, please come out, I’m sorry.*

Madeen, talk to me. Talk to me! Anyone! Please! Please! Oh, God, I'm so lonely, I can't bear this, please, oh Mama god shit fuck mama mama mama I left without seeing you, I had to, I'm sorry. I'm a bad girl, a horrible girl, he drew back the blankets and touched me here and inside and — "I wish. No, I'll be calling out their names. Sort of like standing in a long hallway filled with doors and yelling and making their doors open."

"Don't they get mad?"

"Yes." An inadvertant shiver ran through me. Only the unwary, the courageous, or the stupid could do this. I could not have fear. Stupidity, I could have bushels of. "But it'll — it'll put my mind in a special place, when the doors open on the Eidolons who are very very old. I have to get lucky. They have to grant me passage. I'll get drawn down, past the doors, past the holes, past everything, until I can see the words of trees and flowers and bugs and people and cells and the living things and then the dead things..."

"How do you come back?"

I don't know.

“Maybe I *will* have some tea, little love,” I said decidedly, changing the topic, shifting the cushion. “Please? My head aches.”

That made him bolt from the room like a bee in the want to please me. Now that I was ‘Mother’ Rain dogged about me anxious as a puppy; all my needs and wants had to be catered for before I knew I wanted or needed them. I couldn’t decide whether it was adorable or whether it made me want to weep into the musty damask of the cushion beneath me.

It was going to be agony, the next few weeks. I was like a dancer in the wings of some hall, all eyes upon her as she readied herself for a dance she did not in fact know the steps to. All I could do was strain my ears towards the music and hope that the steps I made up on the spot fitted it enough to not break the rhythm; breaking the rhythm and dancing out of place meant death. Dancing correctly meant apocalypse.

I was a tiny girl when I fought Necron, opinionated enough to be an old lady, all my hopes and dreams funnelling into Zidane as we all stood and faced the death and ending of all things. I was so frightened it could have driggled down my legs, everything all blue and the foothold beneath us

ephemeral as air as we faced screaming disembodied death so thick with something like magic my hair curled into little frizzy snarls. I remember hands; I remember Amarant tossing me up in the air as heat blasted me, I remember Zidane spitting blood. My mind had gently folded up the memory into a white linen tablecloth and buried it beneath the bones in my head so that I could cope waking up in the morning without screaming until my throat cracked at the image haunting me.

Please don't leave me alone for this. Somebody hold my hand. Failing doesn't just mean I die; failing means Vivi standing at the top of Mount Gulug, seeds of fire bursting from his hands as he makes the skies explode and the earth creak in agony and every voice screaming out for mercy as he offers Gaia on a plate to the Last Nothing. Imagine Rain and Sunny and Shiny huddled up underneath a bed, listening to the yelling, listening to the antlions frying in their pits — you will do this, you will do this, hand held or no.

A gloved hand touched mine; when my eyes flew open, startled out of my reverie, Vivi was there kneeling beside me with a cup of fragrant peach-smelling liquid in his grasp.

“I brought you your tea, linden-bloom,” he said.

Sitting up, the useless threads of my ripped dress falling open at my flat boy-hips and slipping off my bitten shoulders and the buttons at the back tangling with the too-long locks of my violet hair, I did not bother to right my clothes. His head just bowed like one suppliant until that long white mane brushed my arms; I took the teacup with both hands and drank at it in long greedy gulps until hot trickles ran down my cheeks and jaw and throat. Mouth stained herbal, I set it down; then I laid my cheek down on his thin-thighed, leather-parched lap and did not leave it until the sky was dark through the cracked windows of the Desert Palace.

Hand held or no.

13. Like We Could Die

Go Not Gently

Chapter Twelve — Like We Could Die

"Today?"

It had turned to rain season. We would lie side by side in the threadbare blankets, only our knees touching, one long bony finger occasionally reaching out to me to touch my bandages. Sometimes he would prod the wounds until they opened, and I would wince, and he would leave off the growing spread of crimson until I lay very very still and the shifting splotches stopped happening.

We would talk. We talked often. Sometimes we would talk about nothing at all; sometimes it would be more him talking than I, soft meaningless babble to the ceiling, sing-song chant that he must have

sung to himself many many years ago without the mages as a younger teenager so that he did not forget conversation. Sometimes we both whispered mathematical calculations — oh, Gods, he was brilliant, sharp as needles — as our hands traced the numbers in midair.

I never had enough energy in me to do any healing, at the end of the day, except for a single shift of the cool netting of regeneration over my skin to lie in Tango's bed and feel myself knit up. He would kiss down my hairline, mouth over the fractures like a baby with a nipple, rooting over my skin with a smile on his lips. "You taste like green, linden-bloom," he would whisper. "You taste like eucalypts. You taste like cell-buzzing, and springtime, and cuts closing."

His face was always close to mine. I would watch his eyes, that shifting play of amber in the dark and violet in the light, like the sky of an alien world, until I was dizzy. He was like an eye-trick book, colour-mixing until I was faintly nauseous. I could see the shine of him even without candles, the flicker of his eyes; I liked it best when it was black and I couldn't see him, only kiss him, move myself over to suckle roughly at some flesh over bone that

might be his cheekbone or the juncture of his neck to shoulder.

“What do I taste like, Eiko?” It was in the dark that I heard Vivi’s voice, the man that was the boy, that beautiful clear otherworldly tenor. I drank that voice, without the face: could have sat up and begged for more like a dog. I wallowed in the occasional stutter, bathed all over in every sentence hesitant because he was thinking carefully of what he was saying. “You break my skin.”

“You taste like dead peppers.”

When he laughed, I could pretend. He was Vivi Orunita, brilliant scholarship student to the University of Lindblum, revered saviour of Gaia along with Prince Consort Zidane and Queen Garnet of Alexandria and the beautiful yet modest Princess Eiko of their very own regency, whom he danced with at balls despite both’s inability to dance. Steiner would come to see him every second Sunday, because he loved Adelbert Steiner, who was like second father to him. Nobody could help loving Vivi. He studied cosmology; he studied magics. My own father thought him wonderful. I would sneak into his room at the university constantly, though I still apprenticed under my father and the Regency

Engineers; and it would be dark, like now, and we would make love because it was *right* and nobody expected anything different except my mother and we were going to marry anyway the moment I had built my first grand flagship. Nobody cared, nobody minded, and it would be dark and he would kiss me, and he would laugh —

Of course I was going mad. It was the only way I could cope. Every day I battled a dozen Eidolons, with will and words and all too often my wand, and came away bloodied and bleeding and more than half-dead. I no longer went to my old room; the mistress slept in the master's chamber. The bed had been boiled new, and the stuffing replaced; I did not want to sleep there with the thought of catching Tango's old everything. I wept there too often anyway, without fleas and lice.

He broke the spell, as he always did. One of his fingernails scraped down the fresh wound again, on my shoulder; it broke and seeped, before the regenerative spell took it again. It was dawn. We always went through this.

“Today?”

“Not today.” I closed my eyes, exhausted, and begged sunrise not to come. It wouldn't; the rains

would start at dawn, and the sky would be dark as the clouds vomited rain and all the little mages hurried about to get things done and keep out the wet. Vivi hardened like sand in a furnace; I sickened, took ill, watched myself go grey in Kuja's ornate mirrors. "Maybe tomorrow."

"Time is shortening." Only malicious in the blunt statement of fact. "Ixion beat you near to death, linden-bloom, petal-princess. He would have speared you through."

Worry, from him? No. His voice was light, methodical, already measuring my torso hanging off the horn of that lightning-horse. "But he didn't."

"Who is it today?"

I don't even know any more. "Don't worry about who it is, Tango. It won't interfere with your precious equations."

He laughed at that, brittle and light, two of his fingers curling in my hair and tugging until my scalp fizzed. "Put your little kitten-claws back in, Carol. You'll scream yourself hoarse against nothing."

"I am screaming myself hoarse against the nothing. The big Nothing. The last Nothing."

He ignored the vaguely tearful reproach in my voice. One of my hairs was plucked out; he wound it round and round and round about his fingers in the darkness, me feeling the motion of it rather than actually making it out. “Who is it today?”

So dead tired. Dead tired, dead feverish, dead pathetic. *Will — w-will you be my partner at the Winter Ball, Eiko? I asked your father, he hasn't promised your hand to anyone else, except Zidane saying he was going to sit on your dance card — like I'd go with anyone else, Vivi. You wear a pretty dress, I'll wear my best overalls —* “How can you make love to me every night and wait for me to fall every day?”

The lazy languid warmth, him snuggled up to my shoulder smelling like gristle and soap, chilled noticeably. He was quiet for a very long time; when he spoke again it was with that rather disconcerting sanity, none of Tango's welling-up laugh behind his words. “Did you know, linden-bloom, that I feel it like a burn when my children die? Not like fire burns. Like ice in the mountains. I can feel them going and I get colder and colder and colder...”

A shiver ran down my spine.

“Colder and colder and colder,” he repeated. “It is going to be a cold winter, Princess.”

“Do you think I don’t know they’re dying, you arse?” Seven little Mages, unnamed but loved, had fallen over the past week. He had obviously made a batch of them at this point in the past, the way the bright-eyed loaves were staling. “Don’t you dare use the Mages against me, Vivi, you know it’s them I’m fighting for —”

“A cold winter,” he murmured. There was something deeply, greasily horrid in his voice. “A cold winter in summer. It must be all the rain.”

I stumbled out of bed, naked, nauseous, knocking my shoulder against some desk as I pulled my shirt around my middle and tied a grubby rectangle of cloth around my hips. I only did up a few buttons on the shirt before I left it in my mad rush, arm groping for my wand scattered somewhere on the floor. Vivi’s laughter danced me out of my exhaustion, my blood all acid.

“You’re a fool, Eiko,” he said quietly, the laughter stopping as suddenly as it had begun. “You’re a fool and sometimes I hate you for playing out this pretense that you can do this.”

Wand wedged at my hips, shedding white over everything as I pulled my glasses off the desk I had injured myself on. “How long does he have?”

“You should have gone with my original plan, Eiko. I could have held you in my arms while everything went on a-burning.”

“I hope your children *hate* you, you rat bastard, you cruel idiot, foul and misbegotten and — and —”

Thin arms around my shoulders as I shook with tears, again, collapsing with my face on his shoulder out of exhaustion and anger as I impotently beat my fists on his chest. Eventually I stopped, my wrists all hurting, and just flung myself into his naked thin self and cried.

“You’re very tired, Carol.”

“I hate you for doubting me.”

“I hate you for going in that room every day, linden-bloom. I hate the way you close your eyes and wriggle in your sleep, restless, waking up listless still, the way they cut you until your organs fall out all slippery-purple and you hold them in with one hand while you knot your skin back up —”

“Tango.” I was startled out of my tears; they were never really tears, these days, just fits that came and went wetly and stormily. I stared up at those eyes, in the dark, fingernails digging in bitten crescents to his skin. “Are you trying to say you’re worried about me?”

He moved away from me, slipping back into bed, flopping down gracelessly with his wings a heavy weight and a *whumphf* as he stretched in the warmth from our bodies. “Three days, princess. Maybe four. My poor little mother, losing all your children before you even birth them.”

It took a couple of swallows before I could speak; then my voice was leaden, crouching down to the trapdoor that would lead me out. “Today I’m fighting Terrato.”

“Don’t lose, meadowsweet.”

“I won’t.”

I didn’t.

I’d once eaten snake at a party; my father generally ate everything that was suitably blanched and put on a tray with a little sprig of parsley, much

to Mama's voiciferous disgust, and though my proclivities didn't run quite that far we had a grand old time eating boo-snails and mu-pudding and grue-pie or whatever we used to down. Once he offered me snake; I thought about ballrooms and lace shifts and jewelled hair-pins when chunks of Terrato finally crashed to ground. The earthly forms of the Eidolons never lasted; whatever mangled corpses I created in that spacious hall would disappear the next morning, leaving only the faint smell of boiled bones.

I always imagined my Summoning as a very long dark corridor with cool rock walls, a sort of cave with deep recesses. Garnet had once told me, in murmurs, that her Summonings had been from a deep pool which she swam down in; the summoner would always go deeper, darker, thicker, more claustrophobic and terrifying with your hands grazing hard roughnesses and groping into cavities and the silt clogging your nose as you blindly grasped the water and bang —

The contact, over and over, with each howling spirit, just about wrenched me apart. I preferred it when they didn't talk.

*so you are the summoner — on the doomquest —
you have bested the others — you will not best me —
i am the zolom — you will not be my mistress — our
bodies will bar the way —*

The deeper I would go, the less I found only Summons riddled in their pockets of the spirit-world like a particularly nice fruit-cake. I would flail wildly, trying to go deeper, like seeing your hands in your dreaming — and end up talking to a bloody mountain or something hideous that was shaped flesh and eyes and no head or a cackling hag-witch with glittering jewels on her deathmask.

*you will not destroy the world — the dark king
will not reign with the white queen — it is fruitless,
useless —*

The spells came easier nowadays. Holy slipped from me as easily and naturally as drying your tongue and waiting for the spit; not the princess of elemental magic, sometimes they would not fall immediately, but shrouded in my own Reflect and hardly even flinching any more as claws and teeth and spells thudded around me I would hit them and hit them and hit them until they slunk off. There was hardly ever any strategy to it; it was only obscene amounts of patience and stamina. Float made me

stand awkwardly and my muscles would crick; usually I would think very hard on how forward I was looking forward to a backrub and a cuddle with the Black Mages. Then it would be back again, down into that dust-choked cavern, trying and trying and trying to go down to a darkness I couldn't reach and a tightness I knew, somewhere deep inside me, I could never fit myself into —

aarrRRGhghhHRHHGgggh

Chunky, steaming snake bits, a lá Carol. Serves ten.

urk

“Mother?”

Rain always had towels ready, afterwards, powder to fling across the room to dry all the blood. (Lots of it was often mine.) He would pass me one and waft about and then cling to my leg like a small limpet; with great difficulty I hoisted him up to my back, and though he hesitated for a moment, he laughed at the treat.

“You shouldn't,” he protested. “You're hurt.”

“I'm used to it by now, Rainy-Rain.”

“I think this is pretty undignified.”

“I think you’re pretty right.” I let him off down the corridor, away from the stench of fresh summon-corpse; I was getting deeper, deeper. I could pick out lifelines, now. My hands would shape time, place, self; I called out to things other than the magic-monsters, and with disgruntled voices they answered. I was going to soon stop at the level of summons completely; I had *absolutely* no wish to start tugging at Dagger’s Bahamut, or at the much-whispered and much-threatened Queen Ashura, so I was going to have to spiritually sidle along until I hit bottom. The Eidolons fought fiercer at this depth; fought fiercer or left me well alone, which was always surprising, to say the least.

(“You’re not going to fight me?” I’d asked one healing summon.

“Well, no,” he’d said, shifting the hem of his white robes rather fastidiously about his feet in the muck and gore Shoat had left. “To be brutally frank, I think you’re damn well fucked anyway, so go ahead and mess around with the bloody stupid apocalypse and see if I care. You’re this year’s whinge and I’m bored of you already. Bloody Summoners, give them an inch and they take a mile. It’s no picnic, you know, you try to have a nice rest and it’s all crazy dancing lunatics or cheeky invalids

with bloated legs or someone who wants to imprison you in a cursed lamp or...”)

Rain held my hand. His grip wasn’t as tight as it once was.

“You know,” he said, very thoughtfully, “I wish I could have been able to see a moogle.”

“You’re going to see a moogle. I’ll show you one when I take you to Lindblum.”

“No, I don’t think so.” Not bitter; not resigned, even; just fact. “Out of all the things I wished, I *wished* I could have seen a moogle. I can’t really wrap my head around what one looks like just from you talking.”

I scrubbed the towel through my hair until it all stood up on end; blood was an unfortunately quick setting lotion. “Rain, you’re — you’re not going to —”

“I’m not afraid,” he said stubbornly, and his eyes were like fierce tigers’ eyes in the dark; “I’m not afraid to die.”

*You’re not **going** to.*

It rang all hollow.

Our hands clenched together as if that would stop it, my hand and his fire-warm glove, and we hobbled down the corridor together. It was early in the day but seemed like later, the desert light shrouded through the windows; as we walked a great slow boom of thunder exploded out the skies, and the thick drops of water came down like pellets on the rooftop. The sheer noise would have woke the entire palace, if there were anyone sleeping other than the hundreds of little mages in the ever-growing tree yard.

“I was born in this season,” Rain suddenly said, pasting in the gap where my tongue was searching and I was shaking for how many times I could say no, and we watched Sunny heft out an enormous bucket to the center of the worn carpet at the foot of the stairs in preparation for the drip. He grunted over it, obviously grumbling; when it was finally in place he had to lean against it very heavily and breathe in and out for a few long minutes. “I remember my clothes getting wet.”

“Don’t do it this time. Gods know how we’d get you dry again, in this weather. I feel like I’m drinking in cupfuls with each breath! Go start a fire in the Great Hall,” I said, suddenly inspired; “tell everyone to come and have lunch there, I’m

buggered if you all are going to work through lunchtime. Maybe your stupid bastard of a father will join us if I can get his nose out of a book.”

“Eiko, he’ll be *mad* —”

“Go on with you. I know how to handle him by now.” Even if Black Tango came with ropes attached, I wouldn’t know how to grab hold. ‘Maybe I can even convince him to let you sleep in our bed tonight, it’ll be freezing. We can play cards. He’s useless at cards.’ (Like we ever played cards in bed. We were young.) “Go make sure the fire’s nice and warm.”

Vivi was hunched over his desk when I found him; he could have been asleep, he could have been unconscious, he could have been dead. Whatever he was, he looked sick and exhausted as I felt; both of us were limp things, and it was getting earlier and earlier in the day that we collapsed without being able to do anything. It was hardly noon and we were already ready to faint. The numbers beneath his gloves were smeared; I ran my finger along his equations, along the bell-curves of his diagrams, caressed momentarily the bizarre compass of his mind and left him. He wore too many layers for me to give him blanket.

(Him and I, the university at Lindblum, him over-exhausted from all-night studying, books everywhere and one candle safely guttering in the shadows of long shelves. We'll get the coolant filter done, Vivi. We'll make the engine work. Go to bed now.)

“You’re getting filthy again,” I muttered. “You need a bath.”

“No, Carol,” he murmured, audibly. “I need light.”

I left him to it, light and all; the mages and I crowded in the Hall, and we laughed and chattered and ate warm white bread and honey and apples and I dozed next to a pillar as Shiny got into some very detailed argument with everyone else what was better, cake or pie. I was half-asleep during the debate about peach cobbler, too many others on my lap and next to my shoulders in quiet and grateful invalid’s nap; that made me panic and I pulled myself out of my sleeping, counting every head, watching every breath, waiting for the Stop. Through some grace it came for nobody, not even the frailest; I half-dreamt about moogles, and eventually came to to a mostly empty hall with Cloud raking the coals and River packing up the lunch things.

Every one of them deserved moogles and peach cobbler and a life not being housemaids for a godsforsaken shack filled with monsters. I couldn't get them out my head; my feet dragged the ground as I returned to my stinking ballroom. Apple pies with icecream; marble-cake, crystallised rose leaves, Mog snuggled into my belly. Tango reaching into Rain's face to pull out his soul. Upside-down berry cake. The thunder and heavy monotony of the water in the desert...

It was no mood to do a Summoning. I had to try three times to do a successful circle; when, in my mind's eye, I finally touched the craggy wall, it was spongy and awful underneath my nailbitten hands.

*I've had enough of this. I've had enough of angry magic-monsters and killing them; I've had enough of faffing about. I've had enough of babies dying. I've had enough of airships. I've had enough of **everything**. I've had it up to here.*

The moss-filth rock crumbled beneath my feet as I strained, scrabbling, punching my hands down, casually breaking the skin across my knuckles. I was tired; I was tired and something was giving way, though I didn't know whether it was me or the fabric of the universe.

I'm tired of being tired.

My wand had too many splinters; they dug themselves into me and worked themselves out in my midnight regeneration, popping out of my skin like caterpillars in bark.

I'm tired of doing this on my own. I'm tired of right and wrong. I'm tired of being kidnapped.

If I closed my eyes hard enough I could hear the world's heartbeat; locked up and safe from even me touching it, inexorable and restless, the ultimate pulse. My feet sunk down; I curled up, hands casting about blindly, waiting for the jaw-tingling jolt that would indicate a force stuck plainly in my way; I had cleared the snowfields and I was diving down. It was getting harder each and every inch, like swimming in swiftly hardening molasses, barely making any headway as I thrashed myself down like a baby being born and

“I call the Name of the final Thing —”

bang

The hardening mantle immediately gave away beneath my hands like a candy shell. I freefell into nothing, into hot darkness, unable to pull myself back to the surface where my knees were crossed

and I was sitting down in a reeking broken ballroom with a chintzy chandelier in the Desert Palace on Gaia in the world that I was born. I somersaulted over myself, finding equilibrium, only to be faced with something my heart thought for a few moments was It. The bandaged hands strained uselessly crossed before its chained chest as it howled like an animal, broken, the darkness our antechamber as I stared and stared and *stared* and my eyes popped out with it and the horrible head swayed from side to side.

feel my pain

I flailed helplessly, aiming for footing and getting none, losing all hope of the light as I was sucked into the undertow.

bang

My hands brushed something clammy and barbed like sahin skin; only the phosphorescence from the great mass of wobbling flesh lit my way, something ill-formed like a half-turned clay pot dropped on the floor, flesh pinks and bruise purples and eyes scattered around willy-nilly. It was a hysterical monument to bad engineering; but it chilled me on the inside, made my blood liquid ice, until I

screamed *calamity* and curled myself up and fell away.

bang

I sank past naked men and women; the bodies crowded out the darkness until I was moving through cold, stiff limbs, swimming through corpses, the flesh all stuck and glued together in parts and then I was stuck inside a ball of dead people and I could see through my hands and my flesh was transparent and

oh

All I could hear was incessant gibbering, and I realized it was me —

NO. NO MORE.

I exploded like a star, out of control and wheeling towards a certain death on the hard ground.

When I came to the ballroom's ceiling had blown off, and every square inch remaining was covered in *bits*; Tango hovered in the center, a rhapsody in organs, and both my legs were broken. I was a pale and shaking wraith in his arms as he took me back to the Tower and his room and laid me down on the bed and watched my shaking lips as I stuttered

through spells. My skin was a net of green, fine and gentle like baby's hair; I stared into nothing and wept, my lips white as snow, soaked through with the rain and the blood and somebody's pancreas juice. I rolled over and vomited copiously on a pile of, thankfully, rags — Vivi solved that one by pitching the acrid mess promptly out the window.

“Linden-bloom,” he said, and his voice was deeply pitying, “you can't do this any more.”

I didn't say anything; my teeth were chattering. He very calmly set my legs, eliciting two shrieks muffled by sheer and complete exhaustion, and lit the candles in the room with a languid wave of his gloved hand. The bed pitched as he sat down on it, next to me, and I kept my eyes open just for the fear of once more facing the dark. The wind blew hard outside, making the shutters rattle furiously; for once, the antlions did not provide ambient background music.

“I t-tried,” I stuttered. “I tried c-calling him.”

“You pulled in the dark things, Princess. Not the dark Thing but the dark *things*, all skittery, but when all else fails use fire, don't you think? I never liked that ballroom, anyway. I'm glad it's gone.”

“Vivi —”

He settled down beside me and took off his hat, and all of his pale birdfeather hair spilled over the pillow as he looked at me with wide golden eyes. “Let me tell you a true Truth, Eiko. Fire is not so bad a death. Neither is ice, nor thunder. If done quick enough there will just be heat and wind and quick, sharp coolness, and then it will be all over for everybody, and it will be just like going to sleep, or turning your eyes up to the sun on a hot summer’s day and feeling it go through your head. There will be no pain in our armageddon. Aren’t Alexandria and Lindblum dead to you, little love, here alone in the Desert Palace? You have fading memory of them. After the burning it will crystallise for ever. Your Garnet, your Elia.”

Wrong move. “I’ll *never* let anything happen to Cornelia.”

His fingers traced my hand, delicately; he very gently kissed the lobe of my ear, just to taste it, to absorb with tongue the knitting of my skin. When he spoke, his voice was deceptively light. “We had a Stopping while you were not with us.”

Not Rain, Mog, please not Rain. Oh, hell, not any of them, my little ones. “Who?”

“I think you called him Sun. You know how quick these things happen, Carol.”

Sunny had died, away from me, while I went into the summoning-dark. Tango took my shocked hand; his voice was hatefully quiet as he gently felt each of my sawn-off fingernails. “He gave his love. They’re all such good children, aren’t they? No harsh words, no fits of temper, no impatience. They greet death with grace. They always have. Little tree-birds, little quiet mage-things all done up in black. Work and die, just like bumblebees.”

So I cried without weeping; my shoulders shook and my eyes were dry and I hiccupped and raged until his newly-bared fingers peeled my eyelids down over my eyes. It was dark; I was exhausted and nauseated and my insides felt as weighty as the spun candy sold at stands at Treno fairs. Everything was sucked out of me. I wasn’t Eiko Hildegard Carol, I wasn’t Eiko Fabool, I wasn’t Kid or My Daughter or Your Highness or Brat. I wasn’t even Linden-bloom or Mama. I was spine and a few bits of trace flesh and tear ducts, my entire geography the Palace and all the sand I could eat, who would do nothing but bury my face in Vivi’s thick leather jacket and wait for the end of the world to be over before it had even begun.

And I gave up. I was not going to summon Necron. Black Tango was going to finally take up his predecessor's well-cut and tastefully-trimmed mantle; the Angel of Death.

I felt tender and sore when he took me, unmoving, parting only my mouth for his own; we were both silent, and my mind and hands were far away, and I don't remember it finishing before I fell asleep all little and lethargic in the murderer's arms. You can only save the world once. You can't go back again.

The next few days I slept in and hung around like a wraith; I left my splintered wand safely tucked into the sash of whatever I was wearing, puffing sparkles rather uselessly and sadly, while I dozed. Fatigue had settled deep down into my bones. The Mages came up from cleaning the basements, the rooms, the hall stairs, the corridors, and we took our meals together, and I watched them dwindle.

I had been far too busy with my own things, to watch them die; to watch their step get slower, for the shortness of breath, to watch them sicken. Now the last of them, we took our meals together and the

weakest sat near me and I helped them eat and we all listened to the summer storm. I couldn't even cry; I was as dry-eyed as a rock, gay and bright and laughing and telling them my Grandpa's old stories, and saying Geez! every five minutes as we all tried to talk over each other.

Life is transient, I thought. Life is transient and everything is fleeting, and here are couple dozen of little boys who have never had the chance to skin their knees or put an oglop in their stew or have a birthday party with their Mama and their Papa and eye cynically shoes that they are meant to 'grow into', or go to school, or fall in love, or request to be allowed to have a mouse as a pet, and what is that worth? Who is that worth?

"Carol," said a voice — too gently, he was never that gentle unless — "he's sleeping now, he'll go soon." And that was the first of the Stoppings.

The unnamed; the named; it was one of them on my lap, who had been a large player in the pie is better than cake crusade, who was candle-light. I hadn't noticed that a hush had fallen on the room. I put my hands under his armpits and lifted him up like a toddler; Tango bent to kiss him, and he took his soul and hat away as he dissipated into the black

ether of which he was made. The smothering of a fire, the bathwater draining away. We were all quiet after that.

“Brothers, mother,” one of the Mages said, “is it wrong to be — frightened?”

“If we’re frightened, he won’t be proud of us.”

“It’s all right to be frightened. But not too frightened. It’s wrong to fight it, I think.”

“To fight it too hard, anyway. I wouldn’t want to go all tired. I want to look cute when I go get hung in a tree.” Laughter.

“You don’t look cute, anyway.”

“Hey!”

“Don’t fight, not now.”

“We’re not fighting, not really —”

“Will it hurt, Mother?”

“Will we like it?”

“Will we be happy, if we’ve been good?”

“It will be wonderful,” I said. “Because no matter what happens, my darling stars, I and Black Tango

will see you again very soon, so you just have to sit tight and not w-worry about it and be just as brave as all the others. You're everything. You're the world, you're the stars, you're the sky. You're better than biscuits or summer or airship rides."

There was a caught sob; and it was Vivi, standing with empty hands at the outskirts of us, me in the middle like a mother hen with a number of sleepy behatted chicks. Those who could stumbled to their feet and clustered around him; he touched them all and he looked at me, and his eyes were a sword that slid like butter into my defenceless heart and shut me down for ever.

"Spit and a little bit of magic," he murmured. "And still better than anything this wretched, deep-dark world ever had to offer, ever gave me, ever had to give. My seeds, my flowers, my small fruits. Here we are, and I am proud of you. I will say all your names and whisper your numbers as I destroy the world for your funeral pyre, for being reborn, phoenixes. You will not rot. You will not be forgotten. You exist only to be free."

There was a collective sigh; and many of them let go in that moment, the mechanism of their magic grinding to the final halt, giving themselves up to

the last of the light as they Stopped. The stronger ones — and that was hardly saying anything — came to ground like mannequins sitting down; all dolls and less than dolls, and I felt a tug on my too-long hair, and looked to see my unabashed favourite smiling at me. I gathered him up in my arms.

“Goodbye, Mama,” he said. “Goodbye, Eiko.”

“I was an awful friend and a worse mother, Rain.”

“I didn’t know that I could want something so much until he brought you here. Oh, Mama, I’m so tired.”

“It’s all right. You hung on so long. Someone should give you a medal and a parade, with, with streamers, and bunting, and a brass band — I love you, Rain. I love you, love you, love you. I never could have had a better son ever. We’ll meet again, I swear.”

I was wasting my words. Rain had died in my arms, with obviously not a little relief, and I looked at Tango again and he looked at me and the shadow-shroud around him flickered away. The sea of swiftly crumpling hats and thick jackets and innumerable pairs of gloves were reflected in his

eyes, a quick sharp glitter, and I held out one spasmodically-trembling hand.

Vivi knelt down. What was left of Rain fell away, slipping gently to the floor like so much laundry from my arms; his father kissed my fingers, then kissed my wrist, and danced his lips up to the inside of my elbow. His mouth was cold and his body was shaking. He brushed them up my neck, to my mouth, the tip of my tongue and the side of my nose; my cheeks, my forehead, the whites of my eyes, the side of my summoning horn.

“Here we are at the end of all things,” he said. His gloved hands took mine; my ring-finger slipped into his mouth, taken, tongue slick against my nail as he bit down fiercely at the base. I bled a circle of jagged tooth-marks. “You are my wife, linden-bloom. Today we are married. I am your name and you are mine. We have always been Black Tango, and we will bless the conjugal bed by destroying everything, fire and flame and ice and frost. We have saved the world. Now we will stab it.”

He dropped to the floor in a puddle of leather, and I half-fell into his lap; I had no sap, no blood, no will, nothing except a growing vortex deep inside me that swirled the way berries bled into cream. I

was white, blank, parched, and he pressed my back into his chest, buried his face into my hair. “You smell like insanity of late, Carol. You smell like I did. You smell like madness and things you can’t see. Like wings coming out. Like antlions. We’re both poisoned, my sweet love, my rosehip and briar-queen.”

I kissed him. The vortex spun; I dipped my finger in it, tasted it, measured the lines, rotated the angles and started the engine. My wand had nudged itself into my hand, and I was bleeding into it, the wound at my finger running freely. His mouth was power; I was battery. Machine. “Vivi Orunita,” I whispered, lost in his lips, one half of a sinking ship with every muscle in my body gone. “Vivi, I call the Name of the Final Thing. I call on Necron. I call Eternal Darkness.”

bang

The stink of death was on my tongue, in my eyes, in the hands he held; I felt the vortex roar and then I heard Gaia scream, heard Madeen howl defeat, felt my skin shiver and crackle. The Stop was everywhere, and it held the world; I had calculated wrong, I had gone the wrong way, no matter how far I delved I would never find Death; Death lay in the

air, in my spit, in Vivi's eyes. Death was the sheer infertility of my body, the magic that had dwindled my monthly bleeding of late, death was the floor littered with clothing like the leftovers from small children shedding their coats willy-nilly. Tango kiss half-cracked my teeth as I felt the ground rumble; the world shifted, minutely, just once, and day turned into night.

Profound night; the darkest night in the darkest year in the darkest part of the ocean, raining shadows and blooming charcoal. He and I were left alone, short of breath. The windows were oil slicks, and the world was eerily silent, and the string between my heart and my head finally frayed and detached and sent me spiralling away.

"Death comes," he said. "We met once. My children all know his kiss; I barely brushed it. I have never Stopped, Eiko. I've longed for this moment."

"Well, here it is, all wrapped up in a box just for you."

He stood, with me still in his arms, and I whipped my legs around and shivered on the floor and groped blindly for Rain's jacket in the sudden chill. I pulled it on around my threadbare finery of Kuja's leavings and the sleeves only came to my forearms; but it

brushed heavy-comforting around my thighs, and smelled like soap and darning and my son, and Vivi wrenched a knife from his pocket and slit it twice at the back.

“There,” he said. “Now you look like a mage. E-Eiko —”

“I was almost ready to blow up Alexandria,” I whispered to the night, to his face, to everything. It was not with horror, but with wonder. “I was almost ready to blow up everything. I wanted to blow things up. How did we get here, Vivi?”

“Love,” he answered simply. “Love; I went mad for love; I drank love and it was poison and I died of it and I ate it and it was sustenance, it gave me wings and ripped my face. Love and yearning for a knowledge I could not possess. Life and death have been such bitter leavings. I existed only to kill. I exist only to kill.”

I felt a rustle in the darkness; he must have held out his hand, and dozens of glowing spheres drifted to midair with crumpled clothes underneath them like sad shadows. The blaze lit the air and burnt my eyes; both of us glowed eerie blue from them, and we must have looked like ghouls.

“Get your glasses, Carol,” he said, and his smile was at once joyous and filled with despair. “We’re destroying Death.”

We went our separate ways. I ran. Night had fallen all over the world; my wand lit the way, and I scrabbled and flailed and almost hit my chin with my knees on the staircase up to my old room. The vortex in me had stilled to one continuous note, a monotone, the rumble of an airship’s heartbeat and exhaust pipe, the worst music in the world. I jammed my glasses on.

Eiko, Eiko, what have you done?

Madeen. “I’ve done it, Mog. I’m going to go destroy Death now. *Right* now, before my sons get even colder than they are. I won’t leave them anything but warm in their graves.”

*Fight Necron? In **your** condition?*

I knotted all Kuja’s silks around my waist until my frozen hips could feel; Necron was burning, burning, in my skin, ready to ice Gaia over into a bleak and lifeless winter asteroid. Another shirt, under the jacket; great, the Apocalypse was coming

and I was going to look like a hobo. Delicate fingerless lace gloves; thank goodness, because those particular digits were swollen as all hell anyway. “Nothing Curaga won’t fix up.”

Don’t play the fool. Oh, my Eiko, you’ve damned the world and everything in it. There is no hope.

“Hope for who? Hope for the world? Hope for the Black Mages?”

Necron’s chains are broken. He will devour the universe if he can. How could you be so blind and work an act of such evil? Can’t you hear him overhead? Can you hear the very soul of the planet shudder, can you hear the mountain of Gulug howl?

“I can hear you bitching like an old biddy.”

Eiko, your mind is not working. You are going insane. You are retreating within yourself like a snail. You know this.

“You’ve never lost a child —”

*I **have**. I am **having**. For the love your heart feels inside the casing of grief, Eiko, I beg of you to do this thing: lead this calamity away from the planet. You cannot banish it now. You cannot parley with him.*

Green-haired girls and Terra Homing and it was hard to think. “You know what? I love how every night I lay awake waiting for *someone*, some voice, *somewhere*, all I got was silence. Not one word, not one touch. Nobody but *him*. For fuck’s sake, Madeen, leave it well alone. Don’t you dare presume to lecture me *now*. Not here. Not while everything’s ending. Not with my children downstairs all dead and gone while they were trying to finish their *goddamn lunches* before they got *cold* —”

Lead him away from Gaia, Eiko.

“— and I couldn’t stop him Stopping, I couldn’t do it, my Rain —”

Lead him away from Gaia and maybe you will be allowed to hold your unborn infant in the afterlife.

I stopped; recoiled; closed my eyes and breathed through my nose. “That was a low blow, Madeen. The lowest of blows. Don’t do this to me. I love you, loved you.”

The truth.

“And if you think that I’m going to let that overrule over fifty dead children who only got to live a year, you must think I’m a selfish six-year-old brat.” Lived, died, all in one single sacred

blessedness. My brains were mangled soup. “You must think I hate everything. You must think I’m stupid.”

Eiko —

I opened the window; that offered no solace to the sheer pitch of the encroaching dark, but what had once been silence was changing: from afar I could hear a slow, curdling scream, a hopeless moan, the shrieks of the damned. The world rang dissonant. There were no stars; there was no moon; everything had blinked out. Garnet would be holding a candle at her window, as the cries of a city in shock and confusion joined the shrill of the Eternal Darkness. My Trance settled over me in the extraordinary cold like warm tea; there was no rain, there were no antlions, there was no light. As my wings unfurled, I ruefully realized why Vivi had cut the holes, and I started to laugh; at that moment I could not think, I could not breathe, but some dictionary part of me knew *hysteria* and I was running mad, flying mad, no longer Eiko but swallowed whole as some part of some indefinite else.

“Goodbye, everything,” I said, and I slipped out the window; my wings flapped strongly to keep me afloat and my hair got in my eyes and I was lost in a

sea of dark ooze until Tango lit up the sky with a blaze of fire. His hands were ablaze with it; I flew close enough to almost singe my feathers and realized with an even inaner giggle that I didn't need my glasses after *all*; in trance my sight was perfect. I took them off and killed them, flung them down into the far-off invisible sand and rolled free.

“Are you ready, linden-love?” He looked ecstatic. We were both insane. “Are you ready?”

“Yes. Yes. I'm ready, I'm ready, I'm ready.”

“This is our day of justice.” We caught the wind; dropped; it made my eyes water and we flew, rolled and dipped and swooped in the darkness like sparrows or mayflies or avenging angels. “We will not fail each other.”

bang.

14. The Difference Of Existing

Go Not Gently

Chapter Thirteen — The Difference Of Existing

It was called the *hour of travesty*, which is all wrong because it was approximately one hour twenty-two minutes and fifty seconds by Gaia's reckoning.

In part.

The only part anyone cares about, really, the overthrowing of the world, the great Blackness — and most of that was flying, through a night as thick and dark and hot as tar, blind-enclosed in a self-made womb as we followed the fire of my Summoning. Necron had appeared like weapon and boiled the seas near the continental shelf, and though there was the sort of hazy knowledge that if we were slow he would destroy things, my mind could have

cared *less*. I plead guilty by virtue of insanity, judgement Necron, and madness was fiery and ferocious and free and for me there were no more tears. I had spent the last few months weeping, copiously, and now I felt a little bit more like the wild girl redux of Eiko Carol Aged Six.

We touched hands, hollering and whooping like swallows back from winter, him one long piercing call through the night as I gave war yells. Our voices were cracked, unlovely, *stupid*, we were drunk on magic, white-mage black-mage in the primordial soup of Death. Our children were dead. We flew.

“Vivi!” I yelled to the black crow in the dead darkness, “Vivi —”

“What, linden-bloom, angel-love, white-wife? I want to eat Necron’s *heart*.”

“I want his tongue.”

“I want his eyes.”

“I want his flesh.”

“That’s an awful lot of f-flesh, Eiko. You’ll get *fat* —”

“I’m skinnier than *you* are, scarecrow!”

The slipstream of our Trance carried us as he did a slow roll, me on my back and him on his front, our arms and legs extended like starfish so that we could touch our fingers and I could look into the madness of his face. We reflected each other, lost, Black Tango and White Tango, heartless and tangled in each other's puppet-strings. I something like loved him. I adored him, I worshipped him, I loathed him to the very center of my being, I *wanted* him, we wrapped around each other like snakes and I combed out his long Kuja-red hair with my fingers.

“Sometimes I feel like I am two shadows,” he murmured to me, mouth a tattooed heartburst of scars only lit by our own halo trancelight. We bled magic, it arced from our flight in long clouds of rainbow stars as my ferocious unicorn-long pearlhorn threatened to spear his hat off from my hands. “Orunita and Tango, Viviblack, merging in to one another, touching when you touch me, the dead and the living. I am a ghost, graveflower.”

He is worse than a ghost. —

— Sod off, Madeen.

“You do talk shit,” I said, mad with gaiety, and my legs tangled around his hips and in the yards of leather from his jacket and his six wings barely

flagging as he carried my weight. I dangled, hips loose, reaching down so my fingers could brush the clouds and my muscles could stretch in limbered anticipation of the fight ahead. I felt like I was made out of sparks. “I wish he was here to watch us —”

“Who?”

“Zidane, Zidane, who else —”

“I would still crack open his head and eat his wriggling brains,” he sang to the sky, “brains, meninges, skull-and-lymph — would you beg him to marry you, Carol, the villainess-heroine of the day? Would he leave Garnet for you? Would he take off your clothes?”

“You *are* a jealous bastard, it would be — it would be — would it be adultery? Do I have to go to him? You *already* have a tail!”

Death was close now. Some organ within me called to him, owned him, was unsteady master of the untamed entity, the foolish caller ready to be summoned whole. Every so often I would curl and spasm in Tango’s grip, bones and jellied flesh as some kind of fit of electricity ran through me, spiritual epilepsy as Necron silently howled both derision and victory. It was my memory that

summoned him, and it was pulling me apart; I was already in pieces. Beneath my spine I could dimly feel the love-abandoned hands of my Eidolons as — like pallbearers — they carried me forward, they carried me to Death, they carried me and he carried me, it will live with me until I die.

“I want him to see what we do,” I cried suddenly, the wind whipping at my green hair. “I want everyone to see what we do, I want everyone to — oh, Gods, Vivi, if we pull this off we can go home together, you can meet Papa —”

Hi, Papa. Here’s my husband. He owns his own palace and everything.

“— you can meet Elia, everyone, you can take the black off, Garnie, Freya, Amarant, Steiner, Beatrix, Mama, Quina, cities and villages and breakfast in the mornings, magic to feed the hungry, magic to cure the dying, we can do something with the rest of our lives — it’ll all be all right again — will it ever be all right again, Vivi?”

“Some black never comes off, linden-bloom,” he said, “the only black that came off came off on you.” And there was silence.

And then there was

I exist

My fingers wept sweat into the shoulders of his coat and my wings shivered in the dark, we were skimming over the sea, we were skimming into the awareness of something that ate at the moon. My insides jangled, I could have pissed defiance, I pressed against my black mage as if in something far more intimate and he hissed. My heart was silence; my skin was crawling off me, and the darkness threatened to swallow me whole. I had been afraid when I had been six when the shimmering gaze of Necron fell towards me; now I was twenty and I was past fear, past suffering, past sanity. My wand was in my teeth like I was some kind of pirate, and I spat spells: *regeneration, shell, reflect, double-reflect, float float float like a feather on the sea. n(xv)d, .9999999 —*

for only one purpose

I exist only to kill. (Skip in time, Rain, it's coming.)

loosed from the final dimension

I exist only to live. (I lived this long.)

I am become the zero world.

I exist only to create. (There's something in my belly which isn't just pain.)

You defied me once; you are deluded. You fear death

I exist only to destroy. (I've broken things enough to know.)

and life, in one breath, and would ask me

I exist, isn't that enough?

to uncoil the ropes. All things live to perish.

It is inconvertible, unturnable, unavoidable, and

though I existed limited at the fringes of time, I have

returned. I am the Eternal Darkness.

Thank you for your greed, Summoner.

Now I can finish what you have begun.

"You know what I desire," Tango said, and he pulled away from me, and we danced in midair like two motes as his coat curved out from him with the heat of his voice. We were lit and blinded by the interlocking web of It, the death-machine, the engine

at the heart of the universe. There was no more Gaia; it wavered and shimmered, like the heatwave, until there was only ocean as if the planet was covered in it once more. And even then the waves stopped: they were cold and grey and rocky, hard and unforgiving, and a full mile beneath us. “You know who I demand. You know what I offer, you know the penance I give. You know who I am, Nothing.”

Yes.

“Give it to me *now*, *Nothing!*”

You wish to be with your children again.

That is very mortal of you, Vivi.

“GIVE US BACK OUR CHILDREN, *YOU BIG BLUE FUCK!*” (I hate long speeches.)

Kuja’s blood and Kuja’s bone. Your existence proves my theory of the nature of the living, as your copy did before you.

You choose destruction. You have always chosen destruction, you have never given anything.

“Who are *you* to judge?” Vivi jeered, both of us suddenly buffeted by a rising wind, crazy fledglings barely able to stand against it. Zidane had been sixteen when he first faced Necron — had he been that young? Had his head been that young? His hands were ancient, limitless — and Tango and I were infant, alone. We were the halves facing the whole. White Tango, Black Tango. “Who are you to be pious? You are the matrix who drowns the world to make it clean! You are death, you are life, and you understand neither nature! It will be mine, life will be mine, death will be mine, *I will overcome you as I did before.*”

You have never given anything, death nor life. You have overcome neither, life nor death. You hold on to a mimicry and are yourself a mimicry; your whole life is a copy, you glorify in your role to work and breed and die. You have signed away everyone, and everyone’s everything, all for the perversion of a memory in the form of defective dolls.

**But I will be kind, as the Summoner offered
me**

this boon;

I will send you to join them.

(The body recoils from the attack on Death. The soul apologises.)

The trick is, Zidane had said, long ago, to keep moving; keep moving, keep moving, c'mon! Go, kids. We did Deathguise. We did Tiamat. We did Nova Dragon. We did — him — I — keep moving, go. And Eiko and Vivi had moved; still smoking from Kuja's star-choked Flare, around and around with summoner's sweat running down the little girl's face as the heat of a thousand spells rebounded off her Reflect. Vivi shone and dazzled like a star, until she was almost afraid of him — almost, too dry on the inside from too many battles, too used to the shock of it — and they were all afraid of him, he lived on fear, he drank by the bankside from new-white hands and thought about being used as a weapon. He thought about Steiner, and swords, and fear, and how afraid Steiner would be if the magic swallowed past the sword into the leaking guts of his

solid-muscled body, and he splashed the water all over his face. *Eiko! Vivi! Now!*

(It's become something like my Angel Flute, my piece of a — did I take it from a dresser? It seems like a thousand years ago — the vines have wrapped around my wrist, I couldn't let go if I tried, persimmons and roses and maybuds and pears. We move like feathers in a tailwind, slipping in soaped arcs, Meteor one-three-five. It's harder this time. The reflection choreography never quite works the way it should. Tango has enough power in him to destroy the sky, but to limit it to destroy something smaller dilutes the fire. He should have burnt the world, held out his hands and)

They were the only ones who everybody would block with their bodies. Freya would move, pike outstretched, to take a wicked lash across her front; Amarant would let acid wash his back and bellow curses in ungrateful pain. Quina would wobble to the fore and take lashes with its bulk. Zidane was always there, scooping them out of the way, rolling and ducking and making heavy landings; and Garnet, who could barely take them herself, and Steiner who sounded like a tincan orchestra under attack. Save the children. Save 'em for something better, not that there is anything better, 'cause there's

no turning back from this point. They were barely children; hard-faced Eiko, fire-handed Vivi, loud and strong and angry and battle-blistered. Eiko remembered the Summoner's Wall, the dying promise of a nation to two seeds, Madeen who was half her creation and half something else that had walked through time and come back empty-handed.

(fried it up. Thank every God, but the Eidolons don't need coaxing now. Fenrir bites, howls, would take my hand off but savages the All-Consumer; around and around and around, touching hands in furious reassurance of each other, my hands on his back as we merge meld recover. The seas are concrete swirls of dark icing on some cake, clouded, misty, thick with salt; breathing is nigh-on poison in the wake of Necron's Grand Cross. It is slow, laborious, for us two fireflies. We are the women at the well who drain it with a thimble, the men at the desert who shovel away the sand, the queen at the loom who unpicks her tapestry and starts again at)

They never asked for this. They had never asked to be born. Motherless; fatherless; each with a single grandsire, the decaying wound of a people's wisdom, dying exiles who sent each out into the world with a sigh and a prayer. They were bred each other's parallel, each other's negative, — Eiko had

written it all down when she was sixteen and thought about that kind of thing in the mental tears of the shaken adolescent, even one who abandoned her weaknesses at the doors of the palace and cranked the engines of airships. Her pen had moved at the exact same time as Vivi's, who used a feather plucked from his mouldering wings, countless calculations in the mathematics of life. She had gained parents; he had gained children; they had both transformed from the little scavengers they once were, taking any affection where they could get it, clambering into Amarant's lap when he was too tired to bat them away with his heavy-huge hands and sleeping until dawn. They had both become engineers. They had both become mages. They both Summoned, in their own way; she took hers from the aether, and he his from the chemicals of the Mist and his own doll-making hands. The Black Mages were never his children. The Eidolons were never her parents.

(the beginning; his Firaga sizzles my hair to rank-smelling nothing and his wrist is broken from the sheer snap of air velocity when pounded back from an ill-timed blast of Necron's Doomsday. I can tell; he holds it in his glove close to his hip, slightly hanging, twisted and difficult. Shadow magic always

makes my mouth taste like vomit. Trying to set his bones into a position where I can cure them back is something else; we're bent and he snarls, both of us trying to move out the way at the same time, blinded by the blue, red featherhair whipping at my torn cheeks as I hold his bones together. Abandoning the world to total obliteration, a single surface Flare, is no longer an option; he sucks magic from the Final Nothing like a baby from a nipple, greedy-desperate.

"Madeen," I wail, "Mog, God, *help us*," and the seas are churned by Terra Homing.

"I miscalculated," Tango snarls into my neck, wrist melting-hot between my palms.

"Shhh, scarecrow," I whisper, both of us buffeted by icy winds. It's storm-dark interspersed with foxfire light, bright and hot as the luminens lights they put up in Treno, brain-blinding. "Shhh. It'll be all right, a little more, suck it sweet and we'll split the marrow from his bones."

"I miscalculated and I raped you mad," he says, and he)

The tiny hot grain in the back of Black Tango's mind that is himself when he was younger wonders about children; and about the numbers that maybe

were never expected to add up, and about the downfall of the Black Mages, whose final bite of the apple was to move away from the symbiosis of the White. All the world has feared them, always; magic runs no more explosive or deadly than Black. It was humans who first dyed it Red, the men; the women were always White, a stock that ran naked and redheaded from the forests in the primeval soup of the beginning of life and opened their hands and Cured. Together they lived in their little villages away from the petty day-to-day of humanity, a breed all of their own, the true-blood mystics and the black-dark mages and they were hated *but you could not touch them*. Why did Mages have black faces? Was it modesty? Why did the Healers wear white? Humility? Did they breed? *How did they do it?* The Black Tango part that is older said *fucking, it is always all about fucking*, but he made his children from clay like the Unnamed God did and they crumbled cooling from the oven. He is flesh and Mist; they were mist; he is the symbiont, the missing key, Eiko Carol the usurper and the bully and the left-behind and the lock. Maybe he has gotten this wrong. He would not be surprised. He has always been imperfect. He exists to only, he Exists to only, he exists To and Only and *there is so much more*.

(bites my shoulder until I bleed through Rain's thick coat; my Regeneration practically knits his damn teeth up in my skin, me whimpering without remonstrations. "I miscalculated and we will both be eaten like mealy grapes, and the world an orange, the moon an apple. Terra a — T-Terra a —"

"So what if we die? We die together, we always do — I wanted to die when you died, before, I wanted to go away and be eaten up and fall into an engine and sink like my necklace, so many beads and not enough string — don't leave me, Tango, fuck you and don't. Terra's dead and if we die, we die!"

The screams from Necron's eternally tortured dead pierced the gloom; we dived to narrowly miss his sinking right hand to crush us in its clutches, wheeling down like birds near the grey sea. My Float keeps us adrift, pummeled into pain by the whip of water against our wounds, skimming as one stone.

"Terra's dead, Carolthing," he says, hot against my bones. "Terra's dead and so are my children, Stopped, listless, one point of freedom and nothing in their names. I called the first one Bibi, years and

years ago. My children are gone. She told me that much. My children are gone.”

“Don’t you want to hold them again? Don’t you think I want to hold them again?”

There are teeming hundreds of dead fish bobbing to the surface of the thrashing ocean, dead whales, dead dolphins, dead sea-things — Leviathan was probably howling in Garnet’s head — death everywhere, death unstoppable, our death. Tango’s eyes shimmered, goldviolet-red, hideous, distant as a faraway sun; and he laughed. “I raped you mad, meadowsweet, it seemed like a good idea at the time, and now you’re dying —”)

I exist only to kill does not oppose I exist only to live. It opposes *I exist only to make*. Vivi has failed as creator, found wanting, found unworthy. *I exist only to kill*. To blow the world up would be restful; relaxing; a slow turning-down of bedsheets and climbing into a soft bed at the end of a very long day, taking off his hat and putting it by the bedside, taking the candle and snuffing it out between thumb and forefinger. He would smooth the eiderdown, and rest his head down on the pillows, and look up at the ceiling with the night all around him in quiet-soft breathlessness; the murnurous haunt of cicadas

outside the window, the guttering lamplights. Death is all he has ever wanted, ever desired, above and beyond the call of batches and batches of spoiled saplings he grew like mould in basements — death, death, everything death —

I exist only to die.

(Another strike. Heat bubbles over our skin, melts our eyelashes, burns us black like minstrels as mages in some village comedy. He goes limp in my arms; both of our tension is gone, sentenced to death and the hangman's noose, bubbling up in us like water from a rock.

We can't defeat him. The knowledge sinks over us, final, forever. Not like this. It's over, this way.

“To destroy Death, the final Thing, the Named and the Quartered —”

“I can't unsummon him, Tango, he won't go back; I don't have the power, I never did —”

“— I have to destroy the world, linden-bloom, queen of spades, for planets we don't even know —”

“Scarecrow,” I say, slow, soft, both of us barely missed again by a Necron not so interested in destroying us flies as gazing hungrily across to the

peninsula of the Mist continent and the tender heart at the core of the world. All he is is a tick; a flea; a parasite — “Vivi, don’t, there’s another way. It can all be all right. *It can all be all right*. You have to destroy the world, to destroy him:)

He exists only to die and something within him grasps her, wants to pull her apart, wants to feel her all over and cram her in his mouth. He didn’t know if that was love, still doesn’t. He doesn’t know if he ever knew what love was. All he knows is that he is full of her, Eiko-tasting bile, both of them One Being; the Final Mysteries of virginity and sex and the blackmage-whitemage symbiote, both of them Tango, both of them dancing the last dance. He exists only to die, but, but, maybe he can still *save* —

(...it doesn’t need to be *this one*.”

Another pause, another laugh, brilliant and sweet until we’re both laughing and dying and bleeding to each other and his wrist is broken again. Both of us are broken, flopping, cracked pieces of clockwork, golems. Hysterics. Blue skies and green fields and everything sweet and good, hot porridge in the mornings, glasses that don’t break, cities filled with stars.

“Let me calculate it, Princess,” he says. “Let me number it up inside my head; let x be Terra, let y be Necron-nothing, let me be the portal that joins them. Let Cornelia grow up to be a queen. Let Tribal and Garnet grow old in their beds.”)

He can still be saviour.

(“Do you forgive them, Vivi?”

“No; never; yes; do you think I can give forgiveness, Carol? Do you think I have it left in me? I’m a ball of dust. I’m a black hat. I’m a —”

“You’re my husband,” I say, “shut the fuck up,” and I kiss him.)

He can still save her.

(On Terra we can kill him. On Terra Vivi can take my hands, and I can give him everything I have; my body, my magic, my soul, my self, and he can boil that up and everything will be white-hot rain and final, lasting, Ultima, I’d do this for him, I’d give, *he knows*, he knows, he knows. We can destroy Death. We will destroy Death. We will have him on two knees and die ourselves, and I’m ready — I’ve never been readier — me and the baby, it doesn’t matter, alpha gamma omega. On Terra it won’t matter, and Cornelia can sleep in her bed and wiggle the covers

off and let her tail beat tattoo on the sides of the mattress-protector. The world will come to grips again. We'll kill a Planet already killed, an enemy we already destroyed, and it will be)

He broke and pillaged her. She can still save herself.

(all right again. We do the maths, both of us, me correcting his numbers, shaping his equations, rising up through the grey blanket of soft sodden clouds to the sky; there is no moon, there are no stars, there are no southern lights. There has never been a portal this big created on the fly, and we dance it around Necron, both of us — this is magic we can do, ripping open the fabric of the air, jars in the night, like the first portal he ever made when he set fire to Lindblum with me hot on his heels. Even with our broken bones we did it — Vivi was a grandchild of Terra, son of its son, heir to the grave-world and it answered his call. Gaia in her death throes knew her heroes; she gave it to us, the mile-wide tear with Terra's leaden sky, like a lightning-bolt in the endless storm.

Yes! —

What is this foolish thi

Drips of it rose past us, the dead creatures of the ocean, everything slowly following Necron's inexorable sucking descent into the vortex. Clouds. Fishes. The darkness, lightening, him and me slowly caught in the wake, dislocated wings straining to outstretch in our ascent to follow Death. I laughed in my black mage's arms, treading the wind, aching to go up and leave it all behind; he pulled my arms down and we hovered in the vacuum.

"We have to go, scarecrow," I said. "The portal will)

If it is one thing, he cannot stop looking at her. Her hair is burnt to curled, fragile shreds; green as gardens, green as hills, her eyes green and her thin face ashen and her unicorn's horn prouder than a crown. His child's coat is ripped almost off her, her boy-body, and each of her big toes is broken on both feet. She held him close like a knife at her side, and she hurts his eyes, she hurt to look at.

She is White Tango, and she is the only thing the world has ever given him. He wanted to rip her to pieces, to stop the burning at his eyes.

(suck us drier than bones."

The gaping maw above us twists, yawns, yearns. The ocean below us was bluer, now, the all-consuming darkness ebbing, and he held my grazed hands in his ripped gloves. His bright insane smile was a scar in his ruined face, and suddenly he looked older than twenty; thirty; forty, timeless, ancient.

“Linden-bloom,” he whispered, “tell me about a windmill.”

“... Tango — We’re going to miss the fucking portal, you idiot —”

“Blossom-bride, tell me about a windmill or I will *rip off your mouth*.”

He looked as if he didn’t know how to say it any more; it was hollow, empty, shaking inside his throat, the smile fixed as if it had been painted there. It shivered, cracked, and his hand very gently closed around my throat, patches of calloused skin through the worn holes in the black leather and my jaw working against them both. “There’s a windmill in Dali,” I gurgled, pathetic. “Scarecrow, what are you doing —”

“You’ve never seen the windmill, Eiko?”

“No.” Everything was sapping away from me, lights dancing in front of my eyes, the roar of the portal whirling around us both. His lips were very close to mine; I could feel his breath on the blue of them, and suddenly I was more afraid than I had ever been in my life — not afraid for being done in by the last choke of the Lindblum Strangler, but afraid of something else, something *worse*. I started to feebly kick in his holding, his embrace, his shins and his groin but my legs were like a rag flower’s. “No, Tango, I never saw that — that d-damned — windmill —”)

She’ll never stop burning. She is the knife in his belly. She is written on his eyelids.

(And then I worked out what he was doing. There really were lights dancing in front of my eyes.

“*No!*” Kicking, his hands dropping, my Trance dropping, caught around my waist lest I fall from lack of wings, draining slowly in the fire of his Osmose. “Fuck you! Put it back! I’m coming with you! You can’t do it by yourself, you black-coated feathery arse! *Put it back!*”

“I exist for one purpose,” he murmured, low and sweet, bright and refilled from me and suddenly as empty as a shell washed up on the beach. “I exist

only to — it used to be so simple, linden-love, it used to be *clear*. Just me and my children and the death of the world. Then you got among all my numbers and now everything is for ruin.”

“*Tango!* You can’t do this! It won’t *work!* Don’t you want to see your children? Don’t you want to be with them goddamn *somewhere?* We’re *one*. I’m you. You’re *me*. ***Put it back.***”

He laughed; he laughed and laughed, until it was half a sigh. The voice from him was suddenly very quiet, and measured, and pale. “Fuck it, E-Eiko. My hands are too stained to hold them now.”

“— Vivi —”

“Darling,” he said, “blossom-queen, maybe you’ll die and be buried in a churchyard, but if I did not do it then you can rot all you like in a six-foot hole. You are the only one who can continue, Eiko Carol, the only one who can live, because I have always existed, I am ten times golem and you came along and I *hate you*. I’ll never stop hating you. I’ll never forgive you. I’ll never hear your name without spitting.”

“— I —”

“*And I love you.*”

No struggling; I struggled in my head, I struggled with my eyes, the bottom fell out of everything, the world revolved, the portal gaped, my heart jerked as if it was trying to get out of my chest. “Vivi,” I whispered, “don’t let me go.”

“Did you think it was atonement, whiteangel? It was suicide, it always was. Glorious hot death. I’d rather go to hell.”

“Not now. Not without me. Don’t let me go.”

“Watch me fly, Carolthing.” He spread his wings, all six; he was almost too hot to hold. “Watch me fight. Watch me destroy him. All white-hot, then sparks, then *nothing*. My memories really will be part of the sky; so will my body, my blood, my name, my writ, my *everything*, watch me kill, watch me in my victory. Think of me. Spit. Hate me. Hate everything. Touch everything. Build your airships. Rebuild your cities. Wake each day thinking of black mages. *This is my curse.*”

“I love you,” I said, and he kissed me; he kissed me like a nine-year-old boy, he kissed me on my lips, he kissed me like Black Tango and it burned like holy fire on my mouth and teeth and tongue until my spit tasted like the windblown remnants of ashes. He kissed me goodbye.

“— Be fruitful, Eiko.”

“*Vivi!*”)

He releases her, he ascends. She falls, like going through thick molasses in the gravity from the portal; his black-tattered coat spreads out in the heat, his hair is a red-feathered halo, he does not look back at her. He is a small rotten crow, a deepening black speck, burning burning as he rises and his limp rag doll falls without flight to the cold sea. Vivi Orunita enters the hole with hands on fire and bright eyes, and a black face, her on his lips and his tongue; the hole closes, and Necron meets him, glowing disdain:

(The soul apologises.)

She never sees him again.

Epilogue — And How They Lived

I never saw him again.

I don't know how I freefallen without dying; maybe it was Madeen or Phoenix, for I had no

magic left in me to float, I barely had energy to breathe. Maybe it was the last slowing from our enormous rip in the sky; maybe — maybe — it could have been anything. Whatever the case, it was less than an hour later when the Blue Narciss found me, floating, just about dead, far too late for a battle they hadn't managed to come to.

Life's a bitch and then you die.

I never saw him again.

What do you do, when it's all over?

There was no 'happy ending'. There wasn't an 'unhappy ending', though, either — it wasn't an ending, he had not abandoned me for an ever-after. I walked zombie for the next two months, blank-eyed; I couldn't speak a word to anyone, I couldn't laugh, I couldn't smile. I couldn't even meet Zidane's eyes, or my mother's, or anyone's; and then, well, you start getting tubby around the middle, and it's obvious you're in a delicate condition that isn't overeating. I hadn't even really believed I was pregnant. Which helped me fit in, because hardly anyone else believed that I could be pregnant, too, except for Garnet; and she sat me down on her bed

and unbuttoned my dress and prodded me a little. She told me very softly that I didn't have to carry it; they wouldn't be so cruel as to make me carry it, if I didn't — and I woke up.

“No,” I said, eyes wild. “No. *No no no.*”

(Because I suddenly wanted it more than anything in the world. Me! I hated babies.)

So she lay me down, head in her lap, smelling like fresh linen, and I told her everything until it was dark in that room and she had to light candles. Poor Dagger, with her long dark hair and the tears in her eyes for me, and no recriminations, and just stroking my hot little brow as all the words came out. They tumbled over each other; I got ahead of myself; I left out chunks; she held me.

“It's all right, Eiko,” she said. “It will be all right now.” And I wept, but it was different this time, and when I stopped I didn't start again for *months*.

And so everyone was told, and they treated me like glass until I stepped very hard on Zidane's foot about three times. I couldn't bear Lindblum just yet; so I stayed in the palace of Alexandria, with my mother, with Garnet and Dagger, and Amarant came and he and I used to take long walks on the castle

walls. He told me I was a fuckin' little idiot; and finally I laughed, and he held me, all clumsy and too tight as if he'd never really hugged before. (For my baby shower, he gave me an Elixir, three potions, four new pencils and the most horrible booties in the world that Freya had apparently knitted. I think he was more than a little in love with her. It was the best present I received.)

My mother rose to the situation beautifully, and took it all in her stride; so did my father, who looked a little more bewildered about it but kept on patting my back as if that might help. It took a while for my parents and I to be able to touch hands again, for them to touch me without nervousness, to not look at me sometimes as if — even — I know Garnet had told them an expurgated version of the tale.

I love you, Mama, Papa. Thank you. I'm sorry.

So I threw things, and grunted, and stomped around, which made everybody else feel better, and I even got *married* — would you believe it — out of social nicety for the Regent's daughter; it was in paper only, because I kicked up more than a little snit at the idea, and my poor husband turned out to be a rather lanky-boned airship engineer from the academy whom I had known in passing, very gentle

and self-effacing with thick glasses, and his name was Alun. We hardly saw each other, at first — I was preoccupied with the baby, and totally averse to being married — again — I already had a husband, I did, I did, I *did*. White Tango. Black Tango. I had been married. I had.

She was born in the summer, red-faced, squealing, summoner's nub and Genome's tail just like Cornelia. Garnet was my midwife. I called her *Vita*, which is another word for life, and different than Vivi's; Vivi was *vivisect*, and she was *vitality*. She had pale feathery lavender hair which stood up every which way, and big green eyes, and for a long while I couldn't look at her either.

They took me back to Lindblum. I got a new pair of glasses. I was Eiko Fabool once more, with a new baby, and a *husband*, and Garnet had warned against the whole damn thing but I threw myself back into engineering and cut my hair until it was short again and some of the scars faded. Alun and I had separate rooms — poor man, he had the most things thrown at him, I think — and I would sit in mine without even Vita, who had her own nanny, and I would look outside my window at the ballet of airships and my rebuilding city and want the dusty dryness of the Desert Palace. I wanted moth-eaten tapestries. I

wanted the screams of antlions. I wanted Black Mages. It was all gone for ever.

Madeen, I said, lit up by sunset and loving nothing one dyed-red evening, *Madeen, did I go mad? Am I still mad? I want things I'm not supposed to want and, fuck it, I'm not sorry.*

Eiko, he whispered, *let me tell you about Madonna*, and we touched again, and I forgave him, and he forgave me. Motherfather. Mog.

Nothing happened much, apart from the little day-to-days that make up the grind of life; I built my airships, and fixed my engines, and worked on coolant, and every so often I remembered to be a mother; Alun did most of that, thank God, and it's because of him that Vita only grew up *very strange* rather than absolutely nutters. (Alun had a wickedly dry sense of humour — I grew to love him, never like *that*, but enough for us to coexist as peaceably as possible.) She was quiet, and she was old before her time, and impatient with things; she liked ruffly panties and dressing up, which only gave Zidane *mild* heart attacks when he saw her come trotting round corners like a miniature panic. Cornelia adored her half to death, for which Vita was

longsuffering; the people who were furthest apart were herself and I.

I loved her. I just didn't know how to touch her. She was a Black Mage from the day she was born, without ever needing to wear the blackface, without ever telling anyone; she once set fire to the curtains by accident and claimed candles, when she was six. (The only thing I was surprised about was that she'd been so clumsy. She was brilliant, sharp, not at all easy to find adorable: I sure as hell didn't.) I was twenty-seven.

I was Regent when I was thirty, taking on the role I'd never wanted, because my parents wanted a chance to finally retire; Vita was nine, and stranger than ever, as grown-up as a woman ten years older than me. Princess Vita. Queen Regent Eiko Fabool. I didn't know how the hell I *got there*; how my mind had let me; part of me was dancing out on the sand and would be forever, a part of me dead and gone, up there in the darkness of space. I had turned the world on its axis. I would never be the same.

"Mother," Vita said to me one morning, "mother, we're wasting time — we need to go to the Desert Palace."

(To describe the choking noises that ensued would be totally beside the point; just pretend I did and that they went on for ten pages, because my daughter needed to helpfully thump me on the back before they subsided. Nobody had ever told Vita — of it — of anything. Maybe Garnet had. *I hadn't.*)

(It was only later that I discovered one of her Eidolons was Queen Ashura, which explained a little, I suppose.)

“Please don’t say boring things like ‘why’,” my daughter continued, patiently. “That’d be tiresome. I need to go; you need to come; I can’t do it alone, I don’t have the words to explain. It’s been long enough, Mother.”

I looked at her, all long pale hair, tail swishing like a cat’s in the gaslight, calm and patient and totally alien; I took her in my arms and thought *the wings will be coming soon* and we left for the place where she had been — ostensibly — conceived. Zidane had offered to bomb the holy hell out of it for me, once. I’d thought of trees in a treeless land, and said no.

It was long past rain season. Bits of the roof had fallen in, now; the sand was going to wear the building down to rubble. The doors opened for

barely a touch of Vita's hand; they swung open, as if inviting her home — inviting me home — and we walked past the long corridors near the docking-bay into the huge hot cathedral of the Grand Stairs. My eyes were full of ghosts; I couldn't even notice as she lead me, struck half dumb, a total idiot in the midst of her self-assurance. Our feet turned west; I looked at the ballroom that had been smashed; I looked at the bathroom with the window that couldn't be closed; she lead us on, surefooted, following a call, to the Black Mage Graveyard.

(I never asked how she did it. I don't think she would have told me. She had more Kuja in her than anything else, and it sounds cruel *but she did*, white-hot and fragile and slightly disdainful of anything that could not immediately keep up with her brainpattern. She was certainly bloody nothing like *me*.)

"Vita," I whispered, "what have you brought us here for? You have ten seconds to tell me *everything*, and I don't want any of your lip, so make it good, you understand me?"

"Fulfilling a promise," she sighed, annoyed. "I should have done it years ago, but I didn't know how. Then I worked out if my body could do it, and

it can; I haven't tried, but it can, I know it, I won't make a mistake."

"I don't know *who* you got your babbling from. Oh, wait. Yes, I do."

The trees were laden with their precious parcels, still strong and beautiful, flowers all around the feet as the roots drank greedily at the soil. Little Iifa trees. The air was thick with something like the promise of Mist; and there were lights, blue lights, and all Vita did was raise her hands. Her fingers were like conductor's batons; she waved them, as if bringing the first chord to earth, and there was song:

The souls of the Black Mages cracked.

(I was thirty. I think I aged twenty years in half a minute's worth of heartbeat.)

(I'm sorry I forgot, Vivi.)

(I'm sorry.)

The souls of the Black Mages cracked; bloomed; gave fruit; and then they shimmered and disappeared and the trees were alive with limbs, dripping with them, noise and breath and heartbeat as a full hundred prepubescent boys stretched their arms out on the limbs. Black Tango's promise, Black Tango's

curse. They opened their mouths as one; took breath.
(For the first time in her life, Vita Orunita laughed.)

All of them black-haired. All of them golden-eyed. All of them flesh. There was confused chattering; they swarmed out of their trees like bugs, like birds, like butterflies, the balance put back in black to white, all of them naked and pulling on coats and reaching for hats. They touched ground; a horde of them, looking at us, rather shy. Some of them were gangly; some of them were plump; all of them were different, like the seeds you scatter in your garden and come up wildflowers, slow dawning recognition and my daughter was *laughing* and —

(Oh, Vivi. I wish you could have seen this.)

“Mother?”

(Rain ran to me. I was reborn.)

the end

A/N: It's done.

(Imagine me having a private party with myself and doing a really lame dance right now.)

I apologize for the fact that this took me *four years to write*; thankfully some of you were apparently used to that from Sunshine In Winter and stuck with me anyway. I loved writing it, but this story was sure as hell the hardest thing I've ever had to do. Sentences wouldn't come. Eiko spent most of the story weeping like a soccer mom on downers. Tango's dialogue got to the point where a very dear friend of mine spends most of her time talking in pure Tangoese to me. *Peanut brine lives inside my bones*. Thanks, Gabi. You're right. Eiko *should* have summoned Gameshark.

Thanks for my best beta-reader ever, Drew/Piett, for calling this the wife-beating Stockholm-syndrome story. Couldn't have done it without you. Again. (He wants anyone who spotted Aesculapius to get a cookie.)

Thank you *everyone*. It would take too long to name you all; Tobu, Alexiel, all the artslaves on the site who have my deepest admiration, Riyuen — Gabi, whose mental Rikku and Leviathan sitting on a TV eating holy popcorn kept me on the crusade, you're the best thing that came out of this — my Angie, my muse. Demeter. Hell, just *all* of you, all right?

To FFIIX fans. To Vivi fans. To Eiko fans. To anyone who thought that Vivi growing up to get lice was a good idea. To numerous cups of coffee. To my reviewers. I love you all. I will seriously bake you a chocolate cake if you come around to my house. It won't be a very good chocolate cake, but it'll be a chocolate cake. (We'll get Gabi to make chocolate cake. She's great at it. Then Angie can make spaghetti.)

This was for all of you!

— **Guardian**

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